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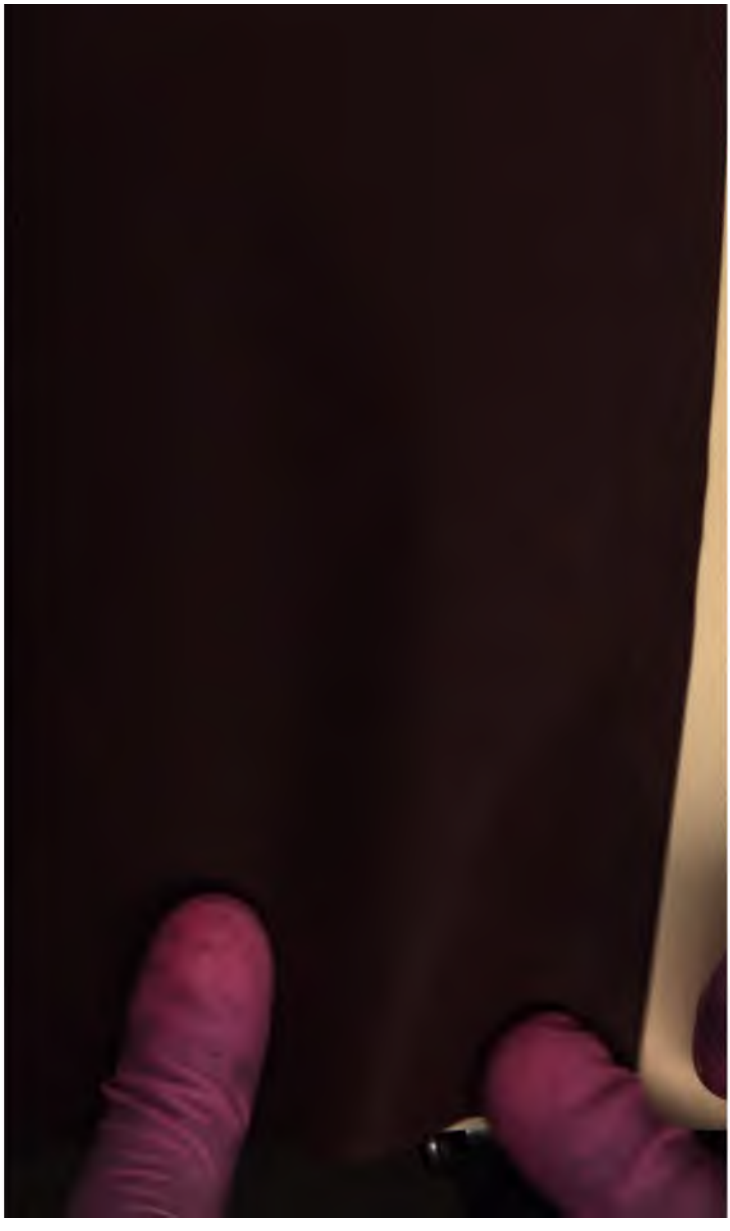
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# THE STORY OF HERMIONE


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# The Story of Hermione.

THE

# STORY OF HERMIONE.

BY THE AUTHOR

OF

*"The Sunbeam," "Gertrude Dacre," "Stories on the Festivals," &c., &c., &c.*




Tale I

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# The Story of Hermione.

## CHAPTER I.

### HORACE DURANT RECEIVES A TELEGRAPHIC MESSAGE.

IT was a cloudless August night; the glorious moon and the bright stars shone in the heavens, shedding their kindly light upon the dimly illuminated pavement of one of the back thoroughfares which led out of the blaze of Regent Street.

A sight it was for a man to moralize upon, were he so inclined,—the solemn beauty and stillness that reigned above, forming a strange contrast to the sounds of noise and revelry which filled the crowded, narrow street.

And yet God made them all—those bright types of His watchful love and care, and those poor creatures, some drunken, others painted, bedizened, and unsightly, who walked this earth in misery and sin beneath the pure expanse of Heaven.

"God has made everything beautiful in His time," but man, formed in the likeness of his Maker, has marred and soiled the loveliness of the image.

A young man in a thin, shabby coat, and a straw hat which looked as if it had screened its owner from many a summer's sun, yet bearing about him the unmistakable stamp of a gentleman, walked quickly along the noisy street.

One or two addressed him as he passed quietly on his way, his head erect, his step firm and determined, a smile half-hard, half-satirical, playing round a mouth, the natural expression of which was neither the one nor the other.

He put his hand into his pocket, and held his money firmly.

It was all he had in the world, and he knew the habits of the locality too well, not to have some fears for its safety.

"Three shillings," he muttered, "for a night's hard work; I must go upon another track. I'll write an article for the *Hercules*, they pay splendidly; I must sacrifice my principles or starve—both disagreeable alternatives, so I had better choose the former, for I know that I'm not good enough to die."

As he thus soliloquised, he drew his thin coat more closely round him, as though the thought of death sent a chill to his heart.

Forgive him for the fear, and do not think him unmanly, for he was still almost a youth, this Horace Durant, brought up, if not in luxury, still with all the ideas of a gentleman, the only son of a lawyer of some repute, who had died in the midst of an honorable career, leaving his widow and his little son almost destitute.

An uncle of his father's offered to pay for the boy's education until he should have attained the age of sixteen, on the understanding that having done this, he was never again to be troubled about either mother or son.

The promise had been rigidly kept, the boy obtained a situation in a lawyer's office, the mother stitched all day long at some fine embroidery, and so they lived, happy in each other, amid privations to which they had never been accustomed.

It was on Horace's nineteenth birthday, that his mother died, quietly, almost suddenly—only rousing herself from the death-like swoon into which she had fallen, to give her darling one last loving look, and to pray God to bless him.

How he mourned her there were none to see, for the few acquaintances he had made in the office, knew nothing of Horace's home life, and thought him a "stuck-up, unsociable fellow."

Soon his work became distasteful to him, and he resolved to give up his situation, and to embark

upon the perilous sea of literary life. He could not bear his old home now that the sweet, gentle presence of his mother no longer reigned there, so he took a lodging in what he conceived to be a more fashionable locality than the vicinity of King William Street, and fared—how, we have seen, for the three shillings which he held so tightly in his grasp, represented the average amount of his occasional receipts from the proprietors of a penny newspaper, for which he was in the habit of writing.

At the corner of the street, some rude, half-tipsy youths had assembled round a miserable half-starved girl, who vainly strove to break away from them.

With one blow of his strong arm Horace felled the ringleader to the ground, whilst a strange light shone in his eye, which seemed to cow and intimidate the others.

They took to their heels and ran off as fast as they could, leaving their victim standing before her defender, pale, and trembling.

"Thank you, sir; oh, thank you so much," she said.

"I hope they have not hurt you?" asked Horace.

"Oh, no; they only wanted my money, and they took that; the half-crown I had worked so hard for, and mother is so ill."

Horace could read faces with tolerable truth, and

in that girl's he saw poverty and sorrow written with a heavy hand, but neither shame nor sin had left their mark upon those poor, pinched features.

"Take this," he said, and he slipped half-a-crown into her hand, and hurried on, her shrill voice blessing him as he went.

On the door-step of his miserable lodging another claimant assailed him. An impudent little urchin of about ten years of age, whose bright black eyes sparkled with delight as he caught sight of the young man.

"Tim," exclaimed Horace, "at it again, I told you I could stand this no longer, you ought to be in bed and asleep, boy."

"Please, sir, I be very sorry, and I won't do it no more, but I haven't had ere a mouthful all day; she," and he pointed mysteriously to a wretched tenement on the other side of the street, "she have bagged all: oh, wasn't she cross, 'cause I only brought home tenpence! Billy wouldn't climb a bit all day."

Now Billy was a white mouse whose wonderful feats under Tim's generalship were the delight and admiration of the neighbourhood.

"I think," continued the boy, his voice sinking to an awed whisper, "I think he's sick, and perhaps if he don't get better he'll die."

Horace looked at the lad sharply.

"Tim, are you telling me the truth?"

The black eyes flashed fire, the grimy face was lifted up indignantly to Horace's.

"I may steal a bit of wittles from that old cat sometimes,—I don't do that so often now you've taught me better,—but I never tell a lie."

"Very well," said Horace, smiling, "I believe you; you see that cook-shop."

"I should think I did; oh my, them pork pies—I had one once."

"How much are they?"

"Threepence each."

"Go across and get two, and bring them to me," and so saying, Horace gave the boy his last sixpence.

In an incredibly short space of time, Tim had fulfilled his errand, and stood at the young man's side.

"Oh, don't they smell good!" he said, as he proudly exhibited them.

Horace failed to appreciate the savoury odour, but truth to tell, it would have been hard to determine which of those two was the most hungry—the well-educated, clever youth, or the poor ignorant vagrant.

So they stood there and ate their supper together. Don't, my gentle reader, put my hero down as vulgar, and unrefined, because after the day's toil he really relished that pork pie; apart from satisfying his hunger, (which the heavy paste speedily did)

there was real pleasure in watching Tim's delight, as he consumed his share of the delicacy.

When he had swallowed the last mouthful, and had drawn a long breath, he turned to Horace, and as though it were a fact worthy of note said gravely,

"This here's the month of August, and that 'ere was the second pork-pie I've had in my life."

Horace patted him on the shoulder.

"When I've made my fortune, my man, you shall have pork-pies every day; now go home, and mind you, I expect an extra polish on my boots to-morrow morning; and let me know how poor Billy is."

And Horace drew out his latch-key, and admitted himself into the house.

He ran quickly up two narrow flights of stairs, to the room which was all in the world he could call home.

It contained all his household treasures, the portraits of his father and mother hung above the fireplace; *his* desk, and *her* Bible and Prayer Book, and work-box on a little table by themselves. Horace gazed on them all reverentially, and a mist gathered before his eyes; the weakness was but momentary. Like a hero preparing for battle, he shook his strong, muscular frame, as if all thoughts which might tend to soften him must be thrown off.

Then he took out his papers and wrote, fluently, cuttingly, with a power that astonished himself.

The neighbouring church clock struck the hour of two; he threw down his pen triumphantly, and read through his performance; then he looked up at the gentle face which hung just above where he sat, and it seemed to him as though the soft brown eyes gazed on him reproachfully, for surely the sentiments he had just expressed were in direct opposition to the bright pure faith his mother had so laboured to teach him.

He laid his head upon his hands, and muttered—

"I must live, none of your tame humdrum work will answer now-a-days; I wonder whether this will be appreciated."

It *was* appreciated; a few days afterwards there appeared in the columns of the *Hercules*, (a morning paper, not distinguished for its high tone, but very generally perused,) a slashing vigorous article, a cut-up of one of the ablest and best of England's senators.

None but the editor knew from whose pen the satire proceeded, and he testified his appreciation of the contributor's talent, by enclosing two sovereigns to Horace Durant, and requesting a continuance of his "valuable services."

The morning after the commencement of our story, Tim, who out of gratitude for many an act of kindness, had installed himself Horace's valet, and thought there could be no greater honour on earth

than to brush Mr. Durant's somewhat worn-out boots, made his appearance rather later than usual; but Horace, tired out with his work, was still fast asleep.

The poor little fellow's tears were flowing fast, for Billy was dead, and Tim lonely and friendless, dependant upon the hard, bad woman who went by the name of his aunt, and daily sent him out begging, felt that he had lost his most cherished companion.

"My pretty Billy," he mused, as the large drops fell from the black eyes on the boots, from whence he brushed them vigorously away, "you was all I had to love till the gentleman came, and you was so soft and warm on winter nights as you lay against poor Tim's face, and now I shan't have you never again, and I'll never love another, as I've a loved you."

A loud knock at the door interrupted Tim's meditations.

A little boy, somewhere about his own size, looking so clean and bright, in a trim uniform, that our friend's envy was instantly excited, enquired in a somewhat peremptory and important tone for Mr. Durant.

Tim's spirit was roused.

"He's asleep," he answered, "and I ain't going to waken him for the likes of you."

The clean boy looked benignly upon his smutty brother, and in his conscious superiority, felt that he could afford to keep his temper.

"Hark you, my lad," he said, "it's a telegraphic message, and he must sign the receipt."

The words conveyed to Tim's benighted mind some vague sense of importance, some conviction that the youth in brass buttons was not to be resisted; he retired with a crest-fallen air, and knocked at the door of the little closet, which was Horace's bed-room.

"If you please, sir," he screamed, "Billy died this morning at seven o'clock,"—then came a great gulp, during which interval the clean boy walked up and down the room once, and then bade Tim in an authoritative voice "not to play the fool," but to "go on."

"And, please sir, there's an imperent chap in a blue coat, and ever so many brass buttons, has brought you a temperance message, and you've a got to sign the pledge."

To this lucid speech Horace listened in astonishment, but lost no time in putting on his clothes, and going to see what it all meant.

"A telegram for you, please sir," said the clean boy, respectfully.

"For me! It must be a mistake."

"I believe not, sir. I took it to Mr. Crosse's

office, where it was addressed, and they sent me on here. Will you sign, please?"

Horace did as he was desired, and Tim's enemy had reached the bottom of the stairs and slammed the door behind him, ere the young man opened the despatch.

Tim watched him open-mouthed, as he read aloud—

"Hovenden Grange, August 3rd, 185—.

"From JAMES CLARK, Solicitor, Redburn; to HORACE DURANT, Esq.

"Mr. Morton died an hour ago;—as heir, your immediate presence is required."

"Hovenden!—Morton!" repeated Horace dreamily, "Did I ever hear the names before? It must have been years ago, but somehow they do not seem quite strange to me; I can't understand anything except that it seems quite clear that I am to go to this place at once."

A deep sob startled him.

"Sir, you ain't a going away, are you?—for poor Billy's dead, and I've got ne'er a friend but you in all the world; why did that bad boy make you sign that pledge?"

Horace could hardly resist a smile.

"Tim," he said, "its a letter come to me from the country, telling me that some one I knew, or rather some one that kn ew me, is dead, and I am wanted down there; but I promise you I'll come back again, Tim, if it's only to see you; and you must not fret

too much for poor Billy, for perhaps, Tim, I may be able to take you to live with me altogether."

Even this prospect failed to console the boy.

"If Billy had not died he'd have come to live with you too," he said mournfully.

"Well, my boy, will you stay here for an hour, whilst I go out on business, and just brush up this old box for me, it would help me very much if you would."

The sense of being useful and important was Tim's best comfort.

When an hour afterwards Horace reappeared, he found the little fellow singing over his work. Tim looked aghast at the change wrought in his master's appearance.

"Such a shiny suit of clothes, and such a stunning hat," he said, as he gazed on him admiringly; "But you've a forgotten your watch and chain, sir."

"No, I have not," answered Horace, as the blood rushed to his cheek, and he felt that Tim with his cuteness guessed how those clothes had been obtained.

"And now, Tim, good-bye; be brave, and true, and honest, and remember that there is One who sees all you do."

A long lingering look round his room, an unspoken farewell to his treasures, then Horace locked the door, put the key into his pocket, jumped into a cab, nodded and smiled at Tim, then drove to the Pad-

dington Station, and was whirled in a third-class carriage to Redburn, and uncertainty.

During the whole of the long day that followed, Tim sat disconsolately on the door step of Horace Durant's lodging, and when one or two of the young man's acquaintances,—friends he had none,—called to enquire the reason of his absence from the Newspaper office, the answer they received from the little urchin, with the tearful black eyes, somewhat mystified them—

"A friend of his have died, and he've a signed the temperance pledge, and gone away to the country."

## CHAPTER II.

### REST, AFTER THE BATTLE OF LIFE.

THE same moon and stars which shone above the busy, crowded city, shed their soft light on the old grey walls of Hovenden Grange, shining like myriads of lamps among the tall trees which surrounded the grim, stately-looking mansion.

Very dark and dreary looked the old house, the whole front appeared to be deserted; only in one of the turretted side windows the steady light of a lamp, and the constant reflection of shadows on the blind, told that life was there; yes, life and death! for a stern messenger had entered unbidden those strong walls, a soul had gone to its account.

In that room where the light burned, on the massive four-post bed, lay the form of a man of some sixty years of age.

There were lines of pain and care upon the face, and there was an expression round the firm mouth,

which told of earthly passions subdued, of earthly failings struggled against, and of peace, although it might have been through much tribulation, found at last.

Now he was at rest; gone from this world's weariness to "where God giveth his beloved sleep."

There were two watchers standing by the side of the bed, upon whom the blow had fallen most heavily.

One was an old crone, hard and unprepossessing-looking, but all the softness of which her rugged nature was capable, gleamed in her face now.

The other was a fair young girl, who stood for the first time in the awful presence of death, so stunned and bewildered that they sought in vain to draw her away, to divert her fascinated gaze from those calm, still features.

Two or three other servants looked at her wonderingly and pityingly, and tried to comfort her, but she neither moved nor spoke.

In a distant corner of the room stood two gentlemen, the village doctor and the lawyer, talking in low earnest whispers.

"I have his address," said Mr. Clarke, "I will telegraph at once, he ought to be here to-morrow."

"That poor child must come home with me," said Dr. Grey; "this house will be no fit place for her, when the heir arrives."

"I don't believe you will get her to move," answered the lawyer, "however, you can but try."

The good doctor did try, and met with a most decided refusal.

"I cannot leave him," was all the girl said, and then the long-suppressed agony broke forth in a torrent of wild hysterical sobs.

"God bless and comfort you, my child," said the kind old man, as he left her for the night, thinking it best to defer his good intentions until the morning.

"None ever needed help and comfort more," he soliloquized, as he passed from the threshold of the house of death, into the silent mysterious beauty of the summer night.

## CHAPTER III.

### AFTER MANY YEARS.

MISS DOROTHY MORTIMER was by universal consent, allowed to be the most important person in the little world of Redburn.

On this same evening, the spinster had a small party, consisting of two or three maiden ladies of her own standing, Mrs. Clarke, the lawyer's wife, and Mrs. Grey, the doctor's worthy spouse.

Gentlemen, as a rule, were excluded from such entertainments, only sometimes dropping in to walk home with their wives, and take compassion upon the other unprotected females.

It was hard to look into the hostess' thin, wiry face, marked as it was with the lines left there by many a care, and to realise the fact that in her day Dorothy Mortimer had been a reigning belle—but so it was.

A story there was that she had been badly used by some one,—that all that was soft and womanly in her nature, had been turned into bitterness.

Those who so judged, little knew the tender heart that lay hidden beneath the rough, eccentric exterior,—little dreamt of the deeds of kindness wrought by her hand.

The evening had dragged on somewhat wearily, two rubbers of whist had been accomplished, and Mrs. Grey yawned behind her pocket-handkerchief, and cast furtive glances towards the time-piece. At last there was the welcome sound of a ring at the hall bell, and an hour later than was his wont on such occasions, Dr. Grey entered the room.

There was an expression on his face which caused the ladies to exclaim in chorus,

"What is the matter? What has happened?"

Ere he could answer, through the still night air, a sound broke upon their ears—never heard by the most careless amongst us with indifference,—the deep low knell from the old Church tower.

"Mr. Morton is dead," said the doctor, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Dead!"—and there was a pause; "It must have been very sudden."

"Yes, he was as well as I am at five o'clock."

There were no questions asked, for the life that had so suddenly passed away from amongst them,

had been a strange and mysterious one, and into the cause and manner of its end, none dared enquire.

"I suppose that girl will be enormously rich," said Mrs. Clarke at last, as Miss Mortimer of whom the good lady stood somewhat in awe, went out of the room.

"I believe she has not a sixpence in the world," answered Dr. Grey, quietly; "the heir is a distant cousin,—your husband has just gone to the station, to telegraph to him, and has asked me to see you home."

Miss Mortimer re-entered the room, sterner, more unbending than ever,—none noticed that her voice trembled with emotion when she said—

"Is that girl alone in that desolate house to-night?"

"I tried to induce her to come home with me, but she would not," said the good doctor.

"I should think not,—men never can manage anything properly; I despise the sex."

"In which case I had better make myself scarce," answered the worthy man, good-naturedly, for he had known and liked Miss Mortimer too long to heed her sharp sayings.

The door had closed upon the last of her guests; then the old maid retired to her room, wrapped herself up in a fur cloak, (remember it was an August night), and summoning her man-servant, walked quickly through the lanes, to Hovenden Grange.

The old woman, whom we have seen before in the chamber of death, answered her summons at the door.

"Where's Miss—What's-her-name? I want her."

"Eh?" muttered Molly, "I'm hard of hearing."

"Goose!" retorted Miss Mortimer, unceremoniously pushing her aside, and forcing her own way into the house.

"Now then, take me to the room where the young lady is."

And ordering John to wait her return in the hall, the imperious visitor followed the frightened old woman up the broad staircase, and through a long passage, into the dimly-lighted room where the dead man lay.

The young girl was sitting there alone at the foot of the bed, and Molly turned apologetically to Miss Mortimer, and said—

"We can't get her away by no manner of means."

At the sound of the old woman's voice, she raised her head, and looked up to see who dared thus intrude upon her grief.

"My dear,"—and Miss Mortimer's voice was softer than usual, "I want to speak to you."

Then she took the small unresisting hand in her's, and led her from the room.

"My dear, you must come home with me; it's not fit for you to stay here."

The maiden looked up in astonishment at the very peculiar figure which was bending over her.

Miss Mortimer had put on a bonnet of extraordinary dimensions, and had forgotten to remove the elaborate cap which she had worn at the party, and the erection thus produced, had a most peculiar effect.

Something, however, in the stern face—a strange softness in the dim eyes,—re-assured the girl; she pointed to the room, and said—

"I cannot leave him alone."

"He has gone where neither earthly joy nor sorrow can touch him more, my child; anyhow, you are too young to be here. What is your name?"

"Hermione," was the timid answer.

"A heathenish absurdity!—I will call you Nancy; and your surname, what is that?"

A deep blush overspread the pale cheek, as Hermione spoke in tremulous tones—

"*He* said to-day that it was Morton."

"Hem! What did he call you when he sent you to school,—your surname, I mean?"

"Then I was called Bates."

"Nancy Bates,—that is more sensible. Now, Nancy, listen to me, and I will tell you something that has never been breathed to mortal ear; but I tell it to you now, because it seems to give me a right in you. Five-and-thirty years ago, I was

engaged to Reginald Morton; the affair came to an end, no matter how and why; I have never been in his presence since, but I have never forgotten him;—for this reason I command you to come home with one who was once his friend: go, get your things together and come;—I am not accustomed to opposition."

With one more lingering look at the closed door, the girl obeyed.

Then the old maid re-entered the room, drew near the bed, and with reverent hand lifted the covering from the face of the dead. She gazed upon the features of the man she had loved, which even in death, were so eminently handsome, and a mist gathered before her eyes, but not a tear fell; she had shed so many for his sake all those long years ago.

She took up a pair of scissors from a chatelaine which always hung at her side, and cut a lock of the thin grey hair from the pale forehead; then she bent down lovingly, and kissed the cold brow, and said in hoarse broken accents, which none would ever have recognized as hers, "Reginald, I have loved you all my life,—the world will be more dreary than ever now that you have gone from it; but it won't be for very long; the days of our age are three-score years and ten, and already three-score years of weariness have passed over my head.

Your child,—for she *is* your child, Reginald,—shall be my care as long as I live; so help me God."

Once more the loving lips were pressed to the face of the dead,—then Hermione stood at Miss Mortimer's side.

"Oh, I cannot leave him alone; please don't ask me to go away,—he is my only friend,—he is, he must be my father; he said to-night before the fit came on, that this day twenty years he married my mother."

"Thank God for that!" ejaculated Miss Mortimer fervently; "My child, he shall not be left alone; my servant shall stay here and watch to-night, and you shall see him again if it may be, but you must come home with me now."

Hermione fell on her knees at the side of the bed, and Miss Mortimer heard her murmur, "Father, oh father, to have found you and then to lose you,—to have borne doubt and suspicion all through my life, and to have to bear it still; it is too hard."

Then an expression of almost unearthly beauty came over the fair young face, and with clasped hands, the girl prayed to her Father in Heaven to look down in love upon His sorrowing child.

Miss Mortimer drew her gently away.

"My dear, you must come."

One more kiss on the cold brow, one more yearning look upon the calm face, as though she would

fain imprint it on her memory for ever, and Hermione followed her new friend from the house which was the only home she had ever known.

They walked on in silence for some time, then Miss Mortimer looked up into the clear bright sky.

"Those stars always speak to me of comfort," she said; "I always liken them to the watchful eyes of a Heavenly friend, watching over the friendless ones of earth."

"Tell me how it was, Nancy," she asked as they drew near the cottage; "I mean the end."

The girl started at hearing herself so addressed, but quickly recovered herself.

"At five o'clock he complained of headache, and told me to send for the doctor and the lawyer; he seemed very much distressed, and said he had done a great wrong, and he must lose no time in repairing it; we sent at once, but before they came he was insensible,—he never spoke again."

Thick convulsive sobs choked the girl's utterance.

Miss Mortimer tried to soothe her in her own queer fashion.

"Now child, tell me," she said, when Hermione became calmer, "what do you recollect of your past life? I don't ask from idle curiosity; remember what I told you about him."

"I don't recollect much about it," answered Hermione; "I do not think that I was always in this cold

country; I have some idea of a bright land, where the sun shines more gladly, and the trees and flowers are more beautiful than in England; but I may only have dreamt of such things. My first real recollections are, of the school where I have been ever since, except during the last two years, when I have come here to spend the holidays; and I was never to have gone back again; Hovenden Grange was to be my home now, *he* said. He came to see me very often at school,—he called me his ward. Never through all my life has he spoken one cross word to me. Sometimes the girls at school used to look scornfully at me, and say hard cruel things of him, —at least, some of them did. I did not know then what it all meant. He never told me till this evening how he loved me—and why—because I was his child."

"And your mother?" asked Miss Mortimer, in tremulous tones, "what of her?"

"She died when I was three months old, that is all I know; he could not speak of her even at this distance of time; it was whilst he was telling me about her that the attack came on."

"And now, my dear, we are at home," said Miss Mortimer, as opening the door of the little drawing-room, she placed Hermione in a comfortable chair, —one she would have scorned to sit in herself.

"My child," she said, "as long as I live this house

shall be yours; in your father's room to-night I promised to be true to you always,—your faithful friend, so long as my life is spared."

Hermione looked up, and tried to express her gratitude, but words would not come; and Miss Mortimer, as she gazed into the deep blue eyes which seemed to take her back to the days of her youth, perceived for the first time, that her self-imposed charge was strangely beautiful.

That night Hermione slept, the heavy sleep sometimes in mercy granted to the afflicted; and Miss Mortimer stood at the girl's bedside looking upon the lovely face, and trying to discover some likeness to Reginald Morton, as she remembered him five-and-thirty years before—as she had seen him again on that night, as he lay in the calm sleep from which he would never again awake on earth.

She found it in the low broad forehead, in the short upper lip, in the delicately chiselled features; then she retired to her own room, to thank God for the mercy which had given *his* child to her care, after all the long years of loneliness which had been her portion.

## CHAPTER IV.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

A FEW words about Reginald Morton, and then we will pass on to the other characters of our tale.

Five-and-thirty years before that calm summer night, when we have seen him on his death-bed, the gifted, handsome young man, had been Dorothy Mortimer's affianced husband. In the fashionable world in which they both moved, the engagement was the subject of much comment, for the girl had neither rank nor wealth to bestow upon one whom all knew to be aspiring, and ambitious in no common degree.

When at the end of six months, the affair was broken off, everyone said that it had ended exactly as everyone expected it would end. Reginald Morton, they added, had grown tired of the lovely

face, and would soon console himself with someone else.

The reasons of the estrangement were really known to none;—jealousy on her part, and indomitable pride on his, had been long indulged in, and led to a separation by mutual consent. Then their paths in life diverged, and they never met again,—never heard of each other, until the old grey-hair'd man bought an estate in the village where Dorothy Mortimer spent the years of her lonely life.

The bright promise of Reginald Morton's young manhood,—his talent, his eloquence, and all the powers of his vigorous intellect were lost to his country. He went abroad at once, a disappointed, solitary man, wandering here and there in search of the happiness, which it seemed impossible he should ever recover.

In the small Italian town where he at last settled down, he had one friend,—an old sculptor, whose earnings were barely sufficient to maintain himself and his lovely young daughter. When at last the old man died, Reginald asked the Italian girl to be his bride. She had never known any other love; none had ever been so kind to poor Hermione, as her father's friend, "the English Signor." England, too, was the country of her mother's birth, and she loved anyone who came from a

place she had always been taught to hold very dear.

So she told Reginald that she loved him truly, —better than anyone else in all the world, now that her father was gone, and she raised her deep blue eyes to his grave face, and promised to be a loving wife to him.

Then the shadow that had lain on the stern Englishman's heart for years, was driven away by that bright, sunny presence in his home.

There were eighteen months of intense happiness; then the young wife died, when her little daughter was only three months old. Again the cold chill fell upon Reginald's heart, and the blight of his heavy sorrow followed him to the end of his life.

Before his marriage, he had made his will in favour of the little son of some distant cousin, and from that time to the day of his death he never altered it.

To the few friends of his youth, he never spoke of his dead wife; and when, at six years old, he brought little Hermione to England with him, and sent her to school, it was under a feigned name. His motives for this were never known; he had lived his lonely life for so long, and had grown so careless of the world's opinion, that the misconstructions which might be placed upon his conduct,

were unthought of by him; and when, two years before our story begins, he ceased his wandering life, and bought Hovenden Grange, none sought to enquire into his past life,—few beyond the inhabitants of Redburn, knew of the existence of the lovely girl who spent her holidays at the great house, and who seemed so fond of the "strange old gentleman."

So father and daughter sat together on that burning August afternoon; he, with a greater shade of sorrow than usual on his face; Hermione flushed and excited, watching him anxiously, and apparently nerving herself to some mighty effort.

She rose from her seat at last, and stood before him; and her words, though spoken hesitatingly, roused him from his reverie.

"Mr. Morton, in pity tell me who and what I am?"

He raised his head dreamily, and looked into the face which seemed more beautiful than ever, with its expression of intense agony.

"Hermione," he said, "my child, my own child."

But even those soft, loving words failed to reassure the girl,—something of scorn was in her answer.

"Your child! yes, I suppose I am; but who is my mother, and where is she?"

As Hermione spoke, there dawned upon Reginald

Morton's mind the evil consequences of the folly of which he had been guilty.

"Hermione," he said, "your mother died eighteen years ago. You told me this morning that I was sad;—this is our wedding day."

She threw herself on her knees before him, and said, "Father, forgive me; but all my life has been a mystery, and to-day, I overheard the servants say of you and of me, what I dare not repeat;—I could not bear it any longer."

He lifted her up gently, and made her sit upon his knee.

"My poor child!" he said, "why did I not think of all this before?"

She had feared his anger;—his quiet, gentle manner frightened her even more.

"Send for Dr. Grey and Mr. Clarke," he said; "I have done a grievous wrong; God grant there may yet be time to repair it! Send quickly, for my head is aching; I have felt ill all day. Hermione, my child, I think I am going to your mother,—to my Hermione in heaven."

They were the last words he ever uttered. He lifted his hand to his head, with an expression of intense pain, and sank back in his chair insensible.

So in that hour, Hermione found her father, and lost him.

## CHAPTER V.

### HORACE DURANT IS A RICH MAN.

THE bright sun, seeming in its mid-day splendour, almost a mockery of woe, shone on the house of death.

At the hall-door stood a cab from the station, and Horace Durant, as he alighted from it, was greeted somewhat obsequiously by Mr. Clarke.

"Dear sir," (with a profound bow), "on this melancholy occasion it would seem out of place to congratulate you upon your increase of fortune."

Horace returned the salutation coldly, and followed the lawyer into the library,—the same room in which Mr. Morton and Hermione had sat a few short hours before.

He waited for Mr. Clarke to speak,—truth to tell, he hardly knew how to begin.

"I sent for you, sir, at once, that we might re-

ceive your instructions; knowing none of Mr. Morton's relatives, we are totally at a loss how to proceed."

"I am afraid I cannot give you much assistance," answered Horace. "When your telegram arrived, I thought there must be some mistake; I have remembered since that Mr. Morton was a distant cousin of my mother's. Even now, I cannot but think that there must be those nearer of kin than myself, who ought to inherit the property."

"Excuse me, Mr. Morton himself stated to me not three weeks ago, that you were his heir,—that everything was left unconditionally to the eldest surviving son of the late Horace Durant, barrister-at-law;—I presume you are that individual?"

Horace looked puzzled.

"Are you sure he never married?" he asked.

"No!—I am sure he never did,—quite certain of it."

"It was only an idea of my mother's," answered Horace, somewhat amused at Mr. Clarke's vehement contradiction of the bare supposition of such a thing.

"Now then, we will proceed to business," said the lawyer cheerfully; and for the next two hours Horace listened to things which he did not in the least understand, and which in his present mood rather worried him.

"Your room is ready, sir," said a servant, "and luncheon is served in the dining-room."

"Thank you, I want neither; I intend returning to Town by the four o'clock train."

"Leave Redburn by the four o'clock train!" ejaculated Mr. Clarke; "my dear sir, the thing is impossible; your presence here is imperative."

"I will be back by nine o'clock on Thursday morning," answered Horace, "I believe that is the day you told me the funeral was to take place; but now I must get back to Town."

"A most unaccountable young man," mused Mr. Clarke; "But in any case you will walk round the grounds, and see a little of the place before you leave," he continued.

"Thank you, not now,—any day will do for that; in the meantime, I trust to your making all necessary arrangements, and if there is anyone who could throw any light upon Mr. Morton's wishes, pray find them out, and do not let the smallest thing be neglected; it seems so sad that he should have died alone, and apparently uncared for. Was there not even an old servant with him at the last?"

"Only a poor old woman who is in her dotage; nothing is to be got out of her."

"Then it seems that nothing more can be done to-day," said Horace, politely.

Mr. Clarke took the hint, and bowed his farewell,

doing ample justice, before his walk home, to the luncheon which Horace had declined.

The young man sat on in the library, stunned and bewildered by the strange events of that one morning.

The clock struck three; he started up and rang the bell.

"Show me the way to Mr. Morton's room," he said to the servant who appeared.

A few minutes afterwards, Horace stood in the presence of the man, whose name even he hardly knew, and from whom he had received so much of this world's wealth.

"*Vincit qui patitur*,—Who suffers, conquers."

These were the words which came to his mind as he gazed on the still features, which told of such unutterable rest,—of the victory won after the hard fought battle of life.

There was nought else to be read there, but Horace lingered as if fascinated, whilst the memories of his past life chased each other wildly through his brain; and hopes, almost prayers, that his future career might be unstained and unsullied, trembled, in words that could not be uttered, upon his lips.

The same servant who had ushered him into the room, re-appeared and said in a low whisper—

"You will be late for the train, sir."

Horace bowed his head, and knelt for a moment by the side of the bed.

It seemed as though he offered his old life there; that old life which was now a thing of the past. In its place stood luxury and ease, and it might be self-indulgence. After all, which was the best, the old or the new?

He tried to determine this question as he was whirled back to London, and could not arrive at a satisfactory conclusion.

From the train he sprung into a cab, and told the man where to drive.

He wanted to be at home again, to satisfy himself that all was not a dream.

"Hurrah!" shouted a lusty young voice as the vehicle stopped; and Tim's begrimed face appeared at the window.

Horace Durant smiled a smile of real pleasure as he laid his hand upon the dishevelled locks, and said—

"Tim, my lad, I have come into a fortune; and you shall have a pork-pie every day."

And Tim had two that night, as a species of inaugural ceremony.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WINIFRED GREY GOES FORTH AS A COMFORTER.

IT was the day appointed for the funeral; he who was to be carrried to his last, long home, had been a solitary,—some said, a misanthropic man. But trouble brings out the best part of men's natures; and now that he was gone from amongst them, the people of Redburn did not remember his faults and shortcomings; but breathed a sigh of compassion, when they remembered the lonely life, and the awfully sudden death of one whose last years had been spent in their midst. There were those too amongst the poor of Redburn, who told of words and deeds of kindness bestowed on them by Reginald Morton, which had been unheard of during his life.

Many thoughts of pity too were bestowed upon Hermione, for Mrs. Clarke had taken it upon her-

self to spread far and wide the fact that the girl was literally a beggar.

Whilst the world was busy with her name, and with her affairs, the poor child sat in her new home, listening to the tolling of the bell, crushed to the earth with the heavy sorrow which had fallen upon her; and Miss Mortimer in an old-fashioned black dress, appeared sterner, and more unbending than ever, as though the grief that had come upon her had hardened, instead of softening her heart; but whenever her eye fell upon the young, graceful figure, bending so meekly over the book she was trying to read, the harsh lines relaxed, and a tender, pitying smile came over the wrinkled face.

"My love," she said, in her gentlest tone, "It is a bitter trial for you, but He Who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, will temper the keen blast to you, my poor desolate child."

And Hermione could only say in broken accents—

"Thank you, you are very good; I don't know what I should have done, if you had not come to me."

Any allusion to her good deeds, was always a sure means of dispelling Miss Mortimer's softness, and causing her instantly to change the subject of conversation.

"You must drop the name of Bates, my dear, for the present. Wait for a surname, until we can

establish your right to one,—it will not be very long before we do. Nancy will be enough for you just now—it's as good a name as any, and not remarkable in any way. It was my mother's name; that is why I like it."

The girl looked up quickly.

"Hermione was *my* mother's name," she said, "so you can understand why I had rather be called that than anything else."

"Yes, I understand; but it's too long, and too heathenish, and the only abbreviation would be 'Hermy,' which I don't like; so you must humour me for the present, my child. Soon, very soon, I hope all will be right. And now, I know I am but bad company for such a young thing as you are, so I am going to write, and ask another young thing to come and cheer you up with her soft, girlish ways."

Hermione feebly resisted the offer of companionship, at least on that day; but Miss Mortimer was inexorable, and a quarter-of-an-hour later, old John was wending his way to Dr. Grey's house, the bearer of one of his mistress's three-cornered billet-doux.

We will precede him, and get a glimpse at the good doctor's belongings before the arrival of the missive.

We have already seen the head of the family, a kind, worthy man, devoted to his profession, giving

his services with equal zeal to rich and poor, never turning a deaf ear to a tale of woe; a most patient listener, a most judicious adviser.

His wife was well suited to him; a quiet, meek little woman, who thought there was not a man in the world to equal her husband, and no children who could in any way come up to the six with whom they were blessed.

There were five of them in the room with their father and mother on this particular morning, their ages varying from five-and-twenty to ten years.

The three younger ones were fine, healthy boys, bearing the respective names of Ralph, Tom, and Harry; then there was a gap, and Julia a tall, dignified maiden of twenty, came next in order to fourteen years old Ralph.

Lounging on a sofa was the eldest son, Walter, a lieutenant in Her Majesty's 160th Foot, now at home on leave.

He was a tall, fine-looking fellow,—this hope and pride of the good doctor's heart,—but there was an expression on his remarkably handsome face which failed to please some people, although they could hardly tell you what it was they read there, which conveyed an impression of mistrust.

Dr. Grey walked up and down the room, then stood at the window, and looked anxious.

"I don't know what they will do if he does not

come; he told Mr. Clarke that he would certainly be here by the nine o'clock train."

"Here he is!" shouted the three boys from the window; whilst Julia screened herself behind the curtain, and peeped out, and Walter condescended to rise from the sofa, and join the group.

The mother's gentle voice was now heard—

"My dears, don't stare so at the poor young man."

"Poor!" ejaculated Walter, in a tone of considerable irony; "I should not mind being stared at all day long, if I stood in his shoes. Eight thousand a year! How I wish it were mine!"

"Hush, Walter!" said the doctor, authoritatively, for the windows were open to admit the soft summer breeze, and Horace Durant's face looked anxiously out of the window of the quiet brougham which stood at the door.

"Good-bye, mamma,—good-bye, my dears. Where is Winifred?"

"Here, dear papa!"—and there was something in the tone of the voice which never failed to please and to attract.

And yet its owner, Winifred Grey, was by no means a striking-looking person.

"Decidedly plain," was the judgment pronounced upon her by strangers at a first glance; but after the verdict was delivered, something made them

look at her again, and confess that they had been mistaken.

Dr. Grey loved all his children, but Winifred was his especial darling;—you could see it now in his broad, honest face, as he stooped to kiss her, and told her to keep the others in order.

Winifred approached the window to check her young brothers' somewhat boisterous chatter; Dr. Grey was issuing from the hall-door, and again the occupant of the brougham leant forward.

"He's a stunner!" pronounced the chorus of boys.

"Rather good looking!" said Walter, patronizingly. "Wants to see a little of life, and to be rubbed up."

Then began a spirited altercation between Ralph and Julia; and Winifred, trying to make peace, was rewarded by a look of disdain from her sister, who stalked majestically from the room.

Winifred looked pained; she had not intended to hurt the girl's feelings,—but, truth to tell, there was little sympathy between those two—between the earnest, thoughtful nature of the one, and the frivolous empty-headedness of the other.

"A note for you from Miss Mortimer, miss, and John is to wait for the answer."

"My dear Winifred,—

"You have heard that I brought that poor girl from the Grange home with me; and now that she is here, I don't know how to comfort her. Youth and age will not meet, and my stern rugged nature is, as usual, at fault. I don't ask you if you can be spared from home, for I know you can never be really spared, but I tell you that you *must* come and help me to brighten up the poor young thing, and stay as long as you can and will.

"Yours, affectionately,

"Dorothy Mortimer."

Winifred looked aghast as she read,—she had only just returned from a month's visit to a friend; and home duties had accumulated to an alarming extent during her absence. She handed the note to her mother.

All Mrs. Grey's feelings of compassion were aroused for the poor desolate girl.

"You must go, of course, my dear; I am sure papa would like it; and dear Walter will, we hope, get an extension of leave."

Winifred turned to her brother; whatever his faults might be,—however visible to the rest of the world,—she loved him with a blind devotion, which had in it something approaching to idolatry.

She saw the expression of disappointment upon his face, as he read the note over his mother's shoulder, and there was a thrill of joy at her heart, for she thought it arose from the fact that he would miss her; but the delusion vanished in an instant, for as her mother left the room, Walter preremp-

torily ordered the boys away, and then stood before her.

"Winifred," he said, "it is no use hiding the fact any longer,—I promised more than I was able to perform; indeed I don't think my father had any right to impose on me such conditions as he did."

Winifred turned deadly pale, and grasped her brother's hand.

"Walter," she said, "do not tell me that you have sinned again, after all your protestations."

"Sinned! Is not that rather a strong word to be applied to a few games of billiards? Well, call it what you like, I played; and met with my usual luck."

"Is it as much as last time?" gasped Winifred.

"No; a cheque for fifty pounds will clear me, but you must speak to my father,—I cannot."

Something in the young man's calm, indifferent tone, roused his sister's anger; the deep grey eyes flashed with a strange, passionate light,—a light Walter had never seen there before, called up by word or deed of his.

"Sin! Yes I do call it sin, to perjure yourself thus, after the full, free forgiveness that was granted you last time. I call it unworthy of a man, and of a gentleman,—to say nothing of a Christian,—to fail so lamentably in all he undertakes; to have neither purpose, nor courage to do rightly; to be in short,

a gambler. Walter! oh, Walter!"—and the indignant tone changed to one of unutterable love, and tenderness,—"I have loved you all my life; it has always been my greatest pleasure to give up to you; your will has been my law; your wishes mine. It is hard to go against you in this matter; but Walter, my own brother, I have prayed (for it needed prayer,) that the love of truth and right might come before my love for you, and—"

Walter interrupted her,—a sneer on his handsome face, unutterable bitterness in his tone—

"Prayed! forsooth it is something to boast of, that you have prayed to set your humbug and cant before your own flesh and blood. Thank you, I will not trouble you further; I can find ways and means of managing my own affairs, without your valuable assistance."

"Walter, dearest, you will tell papa yourself,—believe me, it would come best from you."

But he only shook her off impatiently, and darted from the room.

Winifred stood where he had left her; a strange foreboding of coming evil fell upon her mind, a presentiment that the home life, which had hitherto been so bright and unclouded, might soon be darkened by sorrow of some kind or another.

Her mother's gentle voice interrupted her meditations.

"My dear, I have put together the few things you will want for a day or two, and if you stay longer, the others can easily be sent."

Winifred sighed, and looked up dreamily.

"Oh, mother!" she said, "must I go?"

The mother, accustomed to her somewhat absent moods, only smoothed her dark hair, and said—

"You will be such a comfort to that poor lonely girl."

So Winifred wished them all good-bye; sought out Julia, who was shut up aggrieved in her own room; made her peace with her, and then knocked at Walter's door.

A rough, surly denial was the answer to her appeal for admittance; and with a heavy heart she set out upon her errand of comfort,—walking quickly up the one street of Redburn, and turning from the broad thoroughfare, into the quiet, shady lane in which Miss Mortimer's cottage stood.

Old John appeared at the door, his face beaming with smiles; somehow, Winifred Grey always ensured a hearty welcome, wherever she went. He ushered her into the drawing-room, where Harmione still sat, in the same position in which we left her, two hours before.

The light of the summer sun fell on the bright, golden hair, forming round the bent head, a halo such as one often sees in pictures of the saints of

old; and Winifred stood for an instant, and gazed at the motionless form, hardly knowing whether to turn back, or to go on.

The rustle of her dress at last disturbed the mourner; a crimson flush rose to the pale cheek; a light half-glad, half-timid, shone in the bright blue eyes, as Hermione looked trustfully into the kind, honest face, which expressed such unfeigned sorrow for her in her grief.

Then Winifred bent down and kissed her, and told her how she longed to comfort her. An hour later, when Miss Mortimer appeared, she found the two girls sitting side by side, the scared expression gone from Hermione's face, as she looked up, and welcomed her benefactress with something of a smile.

The old lady greeted Winifred cordially.

"Thank you for coming, my dear, I see you have done her good already; you always bring sunshine with you,—I don't know how you manage it."

Winifred disclaimed all such praise, and Miss Mortimer went up to Hermione.

Something there was in the softened, tender look upon her face which caused the girl to say eagerly, "Where have you been?"

Then the scalding tears fell from the dim eyes upon the smooth white brow, and the voice was low and faltering which said—

"I have been to see him laid in his quiet grave."

"And you did not take me; oh, Miss Mortimer, it was not kind of you."

"It would not have done for you, child. My stern nature can bear things that your's could not; and Nancy, my dear, he's at peace,—gone from the darkness of the winter's night, to the eternal beauty of the summer's day.

Again poor Hermione's head was bent low; she could realize all her loneliness now, when she might no longer think of the cold still form lying in the old Grange, but resting under the shadow of the Cross in the little peaceful church-yard.

Miss Mortimer stood silently for a few minutes, knowing that the bitter grief must have its way; then she turned to Winifred, whose eyes fell beneath her scrutinizing gaze.

"Child, you look ill, worried, and anxious; what ails you?"

"Nothing," answered Winifred; "I am quite well."

"Nothing! That's a satisfactory reason to assign for pale cheeks and sunken eyes; but it's the way of all you girls. How is my godson Walter?"

"Quite well, thank you;"—but Winifred's answer was more abrupt than usual, and Miss Mortimer's keen suspicions were aroused. Walter Grey had never deceived her; she estimated him at his true value.

"Quite well, of course; but bringing trouble with him, as men always do,—husband, brother, or lover, they are all alike; Winifred Grey, put not your trust in one of them."

As the memory of Walter's miserable weakness and sin rose to her mind, Winifred's eyes filled with tears which she could not repress.

Miss Mortimer's sympathies were roused instantly.

"My poor child," she said, "'the heart knoweth its own bitterness,' and I do not seek to inquire into the cause of your trouble, if you do not wish to tell it me; but if I can help you in any way, do not scruple to come to me; there is nothing I would not do for you, in memory of all the love I have borne you since you were a little child. *You* ought to have been my god-child; I can never forgive myself for having assisted in giving a name to a boy. I might have known from his sex what he would turn out. And now I will leave you two to yourselves; I have much to attend to, and you can take care of each other."

So saying, Miss Mortimer walked out of the room, stern and unbending as ever, whilst Hermione thought of her as one who had loved her father even to the death; and Winifred blessed her for her offer of help, in which she saw safety for Walter, and the saving of a great misery to her father.

## CHAPTER VII.

### HORACE RECEIVES A VISITOR.

HORACE DURANT sat in solitary grandeur in his new home. He had roamed about the grounds, and taken a survey of the desolate rooms and long galleries, and then weary and dispirited—he knew not why—he had returned to the library, which seemed to him more home-like than any other place in the dreary old mansion.

From the fair, broad landscape without, his eye wandered to the lovely face of a girl whose picture hung just opposite the cushioned chair, and oak writing table, which he concluded must have been Reginald Morton's accustomed seat.

He sought to trace its history,—to wonder what connection the original of that exquisite portrait had had with the man who appeared to have lived unloved, and died unmourned.

The will had been read; beyond the shadow of a doubt he, the poor penniless youth, was the rightful heir of all Reginald Morton's wealth.

A tall figure passed before the open French window, and Horace recognized the strange-looking old lady who had stood near the grave that morning, and appeared so unaccountably agitated; he had subsequently heard that she was quite a stranger to the late master of Hovenden Grange.

In another moment, the door was thrown open, and the servant announced Miss Mortimer.

With the instinct of a gentleman, Horace bowed, and placed a chair for his visitor.

Miss Mortimer returned the salutation, but refused to sit down.

"Young man, you are astonished to see me here; but I have come to prevent your doing a great wrong. Have you been told that Reginald Morton's daughter is with me, and that you have about as much right to take possession of this house as I have?"

Horace started, and turned deadly pale; that his visitor was a lady, notwithstanding her peculiarities of dress and manner, he saw at a glance; and the announcement that somebody had a greater right than himself to inherit Mr. Morton's money, hardly astonished him.

"Believe me," he answered, in a tone which carried conviction with it, "I did not know until

this moment, that Mr. Morton had a daughter; I thought he died unmarried."

Miss Mortimer had prepared herself for a storm of indignant denials; but Horace's quiet gentlemanly manner entirely disarmed her,—truth to tell, she felt somewhat awkward.

"Well, the world does not confess that he ever *was* married, but I have known him ever since he was as young as you are now; and the girl who is with me, whom I took from this house on the day her father died, is as legally Reginald Morton's daughter, as you are your mother's son. There is some mystery attached to her birth; I do not pretend to say that it is all quite clear; there seems to have been a foreign marriage kept secret for some unexplained cause. Young man, I bear you no ill will; up to this point you have behaved better than I expected you would have done; but I think it right to tell you that I mean to leave no stone unturned, which will enable me to establish before the world what I know to be truth; to assert Reginald Morton's honour, and his child's rights."

Horace bowed politely.

"I will consult Mr. Clarke at once," he said, "and let you know the result; I can hardly judge, or act for myself in this matter."

Miss Mortimer's face softened, as she looked into the honest eyes before her.

"I know it must be hard for you," she said almost gently, "to give up even the certainty of your right of possession."

"Thank you, I have only known for four days that I had a right,—hardly realized it until to-day; I need no one's pity; my former career is still open to me."

Miss Mortimer had no more to say, and turned to leave the room; as she did so, her eye fell upon the portrait, which had so excited Horace's curiosity and admiration.

Something like a tear ran down her furrowed cheek, as she gazed upon the features that had been so unutterably dear to her lost love.

"Nancy's mother," she exclaimed, "what a wonderful likeness. Young man, that must have been Mr. Morton's wife. Good-bye." And the strange apparition disappeared.

Horace stood for an instant where she had left him; then a sudden thought seemed to strike him. He jumped upon a chair, took the portrait down, and darted out of the window after Miss Mortimer.

"Madam, excuse my following you, but I thought that this might be a comfort to Miss—Miss—"

"Nancy," put in the spinster, and Horace continued—

"I will carry it home for you if you will allow me."

"Young man, you are better than the rest of your sex, shake hands, and give me the picture,—I will not trouble you with it, I will carry it myself, and in the orphan's name I thank you."

Horace held out his hand, and thought that this was about the most peculiar old lady it had ever been his lot to come across; he watched her striding across the fields, carrying her somewhat cumbrous burden; then he turned away into the path which led towards Redburn.

That night Hermione slept in peace, dreaming of the loving, gentle face which seemed to have smiled on her, as she laid down to rest. It spoke to her of truth and innocence, and chased away the doubts and fears which had tormented her through those long weary days.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### BACK TO THE OLD LIFE.

HORACE DURANT'S brow was dark as night as he entered Mr. Clarke's office, and his greeting of that gentleman was anything but cordial.

In a few plain words he explained the object of his visit. Why, and by whose authority had he been kept in ignorance of the existence of Mr. Morton's daughter?

The lawyer's answer was in part the truth. The girl had never been recognized by Mr. Morton as his daughter, and no one considered her such. He had always said that she was a Miss Bates, a ward of his. Miss Mortimer was, every one knew, apt to form hasty conclusions, and possibly had not the most remote authority for her statement.

But this explanation failed to satisfy Horace, or to appease his anger.

"It is no business either of yours or mine, sir," he said haughtily, "what connection may have existed between Mr. Morton and this young lady; it is evident that he cared for her; that she had been with him more than anyone else; that she *was* with him at the last, and most probably knew his wishes on most subjects. You may remember that upon the occasion of our first interview, I told you to spare no trouble to find out anyone likely to be in any way acquainted with Mr. Morton, and you told me that there was no one but a decrepid old servant. You suffered me to take possession of the house, to place myself in a false position, on your authority that no one but myself had a right to the possession of Hovenden Grange."

Mr. Clarke looked confused, and again tried to explain his motives, but Horace silenced him, with a request to be allowed once more to read the will.

There it stood; a formal legal document, making no mention of Reginald Morton's marriage, or any provision for his wife, or children, in the event of his perpetrating matrimony, but leaving the whole of his property, real and personal, to the eldest child of his cousin, Mary Durant. One clause there was which had escaped Horace's attention in the morning, but which he now read over two or three times.

"And the sum of £150 per annum is to be paid

out of my estate, to any surviving children of the said Mary Durant."

He turned to Mr. Clarke somewhat sharply.

"Give me your opinion as a lawyer," he said, "would this latter clause hold good, if I gave up the rest of the property?"

Mr. Clarke looked astonished.

"Excuse me, Mr. Durant, you do not understand, you are not up to these little technicalities, my dear sir; I understood that your brother, or brothers were all dead, and that you are the only surviving son of the Mary Durant here named."

Horace cut the loquacious lawyer short, and repeated his question.

Mr. Clarke only looked amazed, and evidently did not see the drift of it, but this time he was obliged to answer.

"Undoubtedly that money would have to be paid to you, whatever might become of the rest."

Horace breathed a long drawn sigh of relief. He had walked into that office vowing a vow that no power on earth should induce him to touch one farthing of Mr. Morton's wealth unless it were clearly proved that no one but himself had a right to it. It had been a relief to him to feel that he must give up all, and so make the sacrifice complete; but now, that £150 a year, wholly and indisputably his, seemed to rescue him from poverty, to

come to him as something to which he had a claim, of which no one could deprive him.

Mr. Clarke looked at him doubtingly. His low, sordid nature could not enter into the depths of Horace's spirit of self-denial and endurance; he awaited his client's decision in silence.

When Horace spoke, it seemed as though a weight had been removed from his heart; Mr. Clarke had not seen him so cheerful before.

"Go to Miss Mortimer," he said, "without any loss of time, and tell her to act as she thinks best, in order to establish the young lady's right to the property. Of course, should she fail in the attempt, —should the whole thing be found to be an invention, you will at once communicate with me; but until it is proved to be so, I don't intend having anything to do with Mr. Morton's money, and I will leave Hovenden Grange to-morrow morning. This is my address in town. Good evening."

Mr. Clarke sat open mouthed, where his visitor left him, and at last found breath to ejaculate—

"A most unaccountable young man, as I always thought; gives up £8000 a year as quietly as—as—as—" then for want of a better simile, he added, "as he eats his dinner."

The next morning, all Redburn knew the wonderful news; that Hovenden Grange was tenant-less, and that the heir declined his inheritance.

Old men and women shook their heads, and wondered what would be the end of it all,—such things never happened in their days.

Young men, for the most part, sneered at the heroism which they could not appreciate; whilst a few in their hearts thought that a man who could give up an income of £8000 a year, because another seemed to have more right to it than he had, must have something of the stuff which makes a man in him.

The young ladies, as a body, considered themselves deeply injured at this desertion of the young heir of Hovenden, who they agreed must be a fool, not to appreciate the numerous advantages of a sojourn amongst them.

There was one dissenting voice, amid the general cry of female disapprobation.

Winifred Grey said in her quiet way that she thought it was a case of much ado about nothing,—she did not see how Mr. Durant could have done otherwise.

Whilst all Redburn discussed him, Horace Durant was on his way to London.

As he sat in the train looking dreamily out of the window, and thinking of all the strange events of the last few days, a polite old gentleman offered him that day's *Hercules*, with the comment—

"Clipping article there to-day, sir, on Lord M—; finest thing I've read for a long time."

Horace coloured crimson, at this praise of his own composition.

In the further corner of the carriage sat a dark, grave-looking man, of some five-and-thirty years of age, who fixed his dark piercing eyes upon Horace, with a steady gaze, which made our hero feel somewhat uncomfortable.

"You admire that article?" said the unknown, in a deep rich voice.

The question was addressed to Horace, but the lively old gentleman answered for him—

"I do, sir,—I confess I do; I admire everything clipping,—am rather in that line myself; once wrote an article at which the Queen herself felt considerable alarm,—a vindication of the rights of the people."

And the individual who had succeeded in disturbing Her Majesty's peace of mind, rubbed his hands, and drew himself up pompously, whilst the dark-eyed stranger smiled a peculiarly quiet smile.

"I presume, sir, you do not admire that clipping article," continued the little gentleman.

"It is certainly clever," answered the other, "I should say that it is the production of some very young man, who was determined to write something which would create a sensation; he has had his will,—he has turned a great and good man into

ridicule, held up as a butt to his country, one who labours unceasingly for its good."

So saying, the stranger closed his eyes, and did not open them again until the train reached Paddington Station.

He, and Horace stood side by side waiting to claim their respective luggage.

Horace's eyes fell upon the portmanteau which the other recognized as his.

"Randolph Douglas, Lincoln's Inn," was the address inscribed thereon.

There was a smile on the dark face, which encouraged Horace to address the stranger.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "are you a lawyer?"

"Yes, I am. Can I be of any service to you?"

"I want advice; Will you give it me?"

"If it is in my power, I will most willingly do it. Will you come to me to-morrow at my chambers, at two o'clock?—No. 30, Lincoln's Inn; my name you already know."

The lawyer held out his hand, which Horace felt ashamed of himself for grasping almost too warmly, but he was so friendless and lonely, and there was something in Mr. Douglas' manner which invited trust and confidence.

Then Horace Durant returned to his old quarters, a poor man.

Tim's welcome was most vociferous. No successor to Billy had as yet been found, and he had informed his aunt that *his* gentleman had come into lots of tin; and he was not going to work for her any more.

He stood before Horace, looking dirtier even than usual, but full of importance.

"Please, sir, I would never do wrong no more, if I might go to the tailor's, and order a suit of green, all covered with shiny buttons; and I would clean your boots, oh, so beautiful; and I would do anything you told me."

The smutty face was bright with eagerness and excitement; Horace could hardly find it in his heart to throw a damp upon such brilliant expectations.

"Listen to me, Tim," he said, "a boy who can neither read nor write, is not good for much. You must go to the tailor's, and be measured for a nice suit of fustian clothes, like the little boy at the butcher's opposite, and I will send you to school, and there you will learn to be a good boy."

Tim tried his best to look grateful; but the green suit, and shiny buttons, had taken an indelible hold upon his juvenile imagination; it was hard to give up such glories for fustians, and the chance of being whipped into a good boy.

"Where am I to sleep?" he said, "It's of no use to try and be good, if I goes home to she——"; and

he pointed ominously in the direction of his aunt's dwelling.

This was a point which Horace had not yet considered, but which now forced itself upon him in all its bearings.

Should he take entire charge of the child, and try and save one life at least from sin and infamy?

He had £150 a year to live upon now, and he had power to work, as he had worked before.

"Tim," he said, after a pause, "I am not going away for the present; I am going to stay here and write as I did before. Suppose we clear out the closet where I keep my papers, and put a little bed into it, and you can clean my boots and get my breakfast, and then go to school."

Tim's delight knew no bounds; even the green suit and shiny buttons were forgotten for an instant, and he ran down stairs to communicate the joyful intelligence to "she" over the way.

Then with a light heart Horace took out his desk, and with a smile of mingled hope and determination upon his face, he went back to the old life.

He could not get on very fast that night, so many strange events had happened in that one short week.

Now the transient dream of wealth, and power, was at an end, the good that might have been done, the evil and temptations that might have crept in unawares, and so counterbalanced the good, were

each of them things of the past, about which to speculate now would be useless.

The next day, true to his appointment, Horace stood in Randolph Douglas' office.

His tale was soon told, and the lawyer promised to write to Redburn, and make all necessary enquiries.

Horace had never quite trusted Mr. Clarke, and it was an intense relief to him, to leave the matter in other hands.

"You must understand," said Mr. Douglas, "that there is no reason why you should not take immediate possession of the property, even though you may choose to give it up afterwards."

"I never felt in the least certain of my right of possession," answered Horace; "I only wish that poor girl's claim could be established at once; in the meantime will you assure Miss Mortimer that I have given up Hovenden Grange until my sole and undoubted right to it can be proved?—by the way, she is a queer old lady."

Randolph Douglas smiled.

"I have known Dorothy Mortimer by name as far back as I can remember," he said; "she is some distant connection of mine; you may depend upon my doing my best for both of you."

Horace thanked him.

"My chambers offer but few attractions," con-

tinued the lawyer, "but if at any time you feel the want of companionship, do not scruple to come and pay me a visit."

"Thank you," answered Horace, "but before you see more of me, I have a confession to make;—I wrote that article in the *Hercules*, of which you so disapproved."

The dark eyes twinkled with something akin to merriment as Mr. Douglas answered, "I thought as much; I read it in your face when our loquacious fellow-traveller handed you the newspaper. And now don't take it ill if I give you a piece of advice; beware of beginning to turn goodness into ridicule, —you don't know the lengths to which it may lead you. Ten years ago, I was young and hopeful as you are now; I learnt to despise authority and to laugh at truth, and it brought me untold misery. I have recovered my happiness now, but there have been years of disquietude in the interim, and I sometimes think that the full sunshine will never come back to me in this life."

Horace walked back to his rooms, and the old life did not seem so lonely now, for he felt he had gained a friend.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MISS MORTIMER GOES TO LONDON.

THE next day, as Randolph Douglas sat in his office, a lady appeared, who on her way to his room had considerably excited the risible faculties of the little errand boy, and of the junior clerk. Even the grave lawyer himself was somewhat taken aback, as the individual thus addressed him—

"Randolph Douglas, you don't know me I presume?"

Randolph confessed that he had not that honour.

"No, it's not likely you should, for you were only about four years old when I last saw you; and of course you have a bad memory,—all men have. My name is Dorothy Mortimer,—I want your advice; I have heard you well spoken of; and in this case I must put faith in a man, although it goes sorely against my inclination."

Then Miss Mortimer proceeded to narrate the

facts, with most of which Randolph was already acquainted, but with the important addition that Reginald Morton had told his daughter an hour before his death, that he had been lawfully married to her mother.

He noted down her statements carefully, but did not comment upon them. Miss Mortimer looked at him sharply.

"It's a strange story," she said, "why are you not more astonished at it?"

"I knew almost all of it before," he answered quietly, "I heard it quite accidentally;"—and he told her of his meeting with Horace, and their subsequent interview.

"And the young man really gives up the property willingly, or at least will do so, when Nancy's claim is made clear? Well, Mr. Clarke said as much, but I did not believe him—he's an idiot like most men."

"Yes, he gives it up for the present, so that there may be time to make enquiries; of course, if after six or eight months, you should fail to substantiate your protege's claim to being legally Mr. Morton's daughter, he must take possession."

"The world would call him quixotic to give up the right which is undoubtedly his, but he thinks, in fact he says, Mr. Morton's last wish was to make another will."

"It seems a strange story. Why was the girl's

parentage kept a secret, if there is no stain upon her birth?"

There was an angry cloud on Miss Mortimer's brow, as she rose from her seat.

"I must go to some other lawyer," she said, "your sympathies I see are already engaged on this young man's behalf."

"So much so, that I feel I should be best pleasing him, by helping you to attain the end you have in view, as speedily as possible. I see Miss Mortimer that you are prejudiced against our sex in general, and I dare say this Mr. Durant has his faults like the rest of us, but believe me he is in earnest in wanting to do justice, and to act rightly."

Miss Mortimer thought for an instant, and then fixed her eyes steadily upon Randolph Douglas' face.

"Your father and mother were honest people," she said; "it would be strange if you were not true, and there's something about you not as bad as might be expected."

"Considering my sex," murmured Randolph.

Miss Mortimer did not appear to heed the interruption.

"So these are my instructions," she continued, "trace Reginald Morton's life for the last thirty years; send to Italy, Germany, Switzerland, anywhere in fact; go yourself if you think it necessary, and I promise you, you shall be rewarded liberally. Find

the marriage certificate, and bring it home to me, and I will bless you with an old woman's fervent blessing."

Randolph looked up wonderingly into the wrinkled face, which told of some unaccountable emotion.

Miss Mortimer noted the glance, and saw that it had in it something of curiosity,—she laid her hand on his arm, and spoke quickly and nervously—

"Randolph Douglas, I feel you are to be trusted, although you are a man. It may make you perform your mission more zealously, if I tell you why it is I take an interest in this girl; you have heard from your mother, I dare say, (for people *will* talk), that my life was embittered by disappointment,—did you ever chance to hear the name of the man who is said to have deceived and jilted me?—although the world was wrong on that score," she added *sotto voce*.

"No," answered Randolph.

Miss Mortimer put her hand upon the handle of the door, so that she might effect a speedy exit.

"Then I tell it you now," she said in a voice in which no trace of emotion was discernible. "It was Reginald Morton."

"Before Randolph could collect himself sufficiently to say something in answer to this unexpected confession, the door closed, and Miss Mortimer ran down the narrow staircase, and hurried into the cab, which was waiting to take her back to the station.

## CHAPTER X.

### WINIFRED'S SORROWS.

"JOHN, what have the young ladies been doing?" said Miss Mortimer to the old servant, who was waiting to meet her at Redburn Station.

"Well, ma'am, they've been very quiet all day, sitting in doors reading, and then going out a bit, and just as I was coming away, Mr. Walter Grey came in."

At this intelligence Miss Mortimer quickened her pace, almost to a run, and John hobbled after her, wondering what new freak possessed his mistress.

The old lady expected to find the delinquent in the garden, and to give him his conge, in such a manner as would mark her disapprobation of his society; but the garden was desolate, and the two girls were sitting in the drawing-room alone.

"So your brother has been here," said the old lady,

turning somewhat sharply upon Winifred, failing to notice her favourite's pale, haggard face. "Nancy, did you see Mr. Walter Grey?"

"Only for a minute,—he met us in the garden, and Winifred kindly brought him in at once; she knows how I shun everyone just now."

Miss Mortimer was mollified; after all, no mischief could possibly have been done.

"Well," she said, trying to be cheerful, "I have been to London, and I have seen Randolph Douglas; six months hence Nancy, I feel sure your rights will be fully established."

"My *one* right," whispered Hermione, "to be owned as *his* child, that is all I care for,—I willingly give up all else."

Miss Mortimer turned to Winifred.

"Why child, what ails you?—you look as though you had seen a ghost."

A ghastly smile was on poor Winifred's face as she answered—

"Miss Mortimer, may I speak to you alone for five minutes?"

"Certainly, my dear, for an hour if you like."

There was a tiny room in the cottage, known as Miss Mortimer's study; thither they retired.

"Now child, what do you want?"

"You told me to come to you in trouble. I have come to you now. There is no use in hiding mat-

ters, indeed I told him that if I asked, I must tell the whole truth; Walter—"

Miss Mortimer's "Humph, I thought it had something to do with Walter," was certainly not encouraging, but Winifred had nerved herself to a mighty effort, and went on unflinchingly.

"Walter has been foolish, and thoughtless, and now he is in debt. My father's means are small; lately he has been more than usually worried, and anxious; we do not think he is well, and—and—"

"And you want me to help your scapegrace of a brother?"

Winifred's head was bowed low with shame as she answered—

"It would be only as a loan. My aunt left me a small legacy, which must be paid before the year is out; until that time, if you could lend me fifty pounds, I should be so grateful."

Miss Mortimer stamped her foot impatiently.

"It is the old story," she muttered, "a woman suffering for the sake of a reprobate. I thought, child, that the legacy was to have accomplished such wonders,—taken your mother and the boys to the sea-side, and I don't know what besides. Don't think I grudge you the money, Winifred; you should have four times as much if you required it, and if it were in my power to give it you, but I do grudge your throwing it away on the heartless, selfish spendthrift I know your brother to be."

Winifred coloured crimson at hearing her idol thus spoken of, and Miss Mortimer continued—

"Winifred Grey, tell me truly, is this the first time your brother has so transgressed?"

Winifred could not tell an untruth, even to save Walter from blame, and she felt she must answer; those piercing eyes were fixed upon her face, as though they would read her very soul.

"No," she answered steadily, "once before he appealed to papa, but he promises that it is never to happen again."

There was such utter, helpless misery in the tone, that Miss Mortimer thought it would be cruel to say more. She took out her cheque-book, and filled up a cheque for sixty pounds.

"Take it," she said; "I suppose you will insist upon repaying me fifty pounds,—mind you don't think of it until it is quite convenient to yourself; the other ten are a present from me to my hopeful godson, (serves me right for accepting the office in behalf of a boy,) a little ready money may perhaps save him from gambling, (Winifred winced at the words) because he does not chance to have a spare shilling in his pocket; but child, mind you, I will not help him again. There is nothing I have in the world I would not willingly give up to you, but even now I am not sure that I am right, in giving you the means to get Walter out of trouble."

"It is for my father's sake," said Winifred piteously; "Oh, Miss Mortimer, how can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

"Come, don't talk rubbish; only make your brother understand that it is for your father's sake, and your's, that I have lent the money,—he has no share in the matter. Tell him I can never respect a man who does not respect himself. And now I suppose you must go home, and wish him good-bye. Tell your mother that she must spare you for another week; that poor thing clings to you more than to anyone."

The whole party in the High Street brightened as Winifred appeared among them, as they sat at tea; her presence was always like a sunbeam in her home; and whilst the boys vociferated their clamorous greetings, her eyes were fixed upon her father's face, as he smiled and welcomed her in his own kind way; but it was such a weary, sickly smile—Winifred asked if he felt ill, and he said "No, only tired; it was very warm, and he was overworked; there was really nothing the matter with him."

"So we are to lose you again, my bird," he said, as Winifred told of Miss Mortimer's anxiety that she should return to the cottage for a few days.

"Well, I can't bear you to be away, but I would not keep you from doing good to that poor girl; I

cannot forget her expression of agony on the night Mr. Morton died."

Winifred stooped down, and kissed her father.

"I don't like leaving you, papa, dear, looking so pale and tired."

He only sighed wearily, and bade her go, for Walter was waiting to walk back with her.

"So the old girl has actually sent me a present of ten pounds; why did she not make it twenty?"

Winifred was indignant—Walter's tone of levity jarred on her feelings—she gave him the message which Miss Mortimer had charged her to deliver, and his clear ringing laugh echoed through the quiet evening air.

"Walter," said his sister gravely, "if you can be serious for one moment, I want to speak to you."

"Very well, I will be as grave as a judge; but no sermonizing, mind you—I hate cant."

"I only wanted to say" (and the tones in which Winifred spoke were very low and tremulous,) "that I do not think my father is at all well; for some time he has been failing; you will not be here again until Christmas, and if there is anything on your conscience which hereafter you might repent of never having told him, do it this very evening."

Walter was sobered in an instant. With all his faults he had not grown up in sight of such sterling, single-hearted goodness as was his father's, without

learning to respect it, however far he might be from following the example set him.

"Winifred, what do you mean?" he said anxiously. "Do you think that he will die?"

A shudder ran through the slight frame as the sister answered—

"God forbid, Walter! But life is always uncertain; and this sudden death at the Grange seems to have made us all think of such things, even more than usual. Walter, dearest, will you go to him to night, and promise him what you have already promised me, that you will go on more steadily for the future? He knows nothing of your last difficulties, but I cannot help thinking that he has heard something about you, which has saddened him in some way."

Walter promised compliance, and the brother and sister walked on in silence to the cottage.

A light burned in the drawing-room, and through the open window they heard Miss Mortimer's voice addressing Hermione.

"Shall I go in, and thank the old girl, Winifred, and bid her good bye?"

Again the shade was on Winifred's brow.

"Not to-night, Walter; I don't think she would like being disturbed so late."

Walter smiled.

"Why don't you tell the truth, and say that she

would prefer keeping the beauty out of my sight? By-the-bye, Winifred, that girl is lovely."

"She is very beautiful," answered Winifred; "but now, Walter, I must send you away;"—and the eyes that were raised to Walter's face were full of tears.

He put his arm round her, and drew her more closely to his side.

"Win," he said, "there is no one like you in all the world; no one I love half as well;—you will believe this whatever may happen."

In an instant Winifred was humble, and self-reproachful, and tried to persuade herself that she had been wrong in her harsh judgment of her brother.

"Walter," she said, "I did not mean to be cross, will you forgive me?"

"My good little sister! what have I to forgive you, who all through my life have been my guardian angel? It was a bad day for me, Win, when I left home and my sage little mentor."

Then as if ashamed of the unusual expressions of affection, he bent down, gave her one long kiss, and left her.

He turned round when he reached the end of the lane, and saw her standing in the same place, with one bright, solitary star shining above her in the clear evening sky, seeming to guard and watch over her with its pure soft light.

Julia Grey awaited her brother's return at the hall door.

"Walter," she said, "I think there is something the matter. Papa and mamma have been shut up in the dining-room ever since the post came in, and they say they want to be alone."

He pushed her aside somewhat roughly, and entered the room.

His mother met him with a pale, sad face.

"Walter, my boy," she said, "we have had bad news this evening. We have lost all we had in the world; your father's hardly-earned savings of six-and-twenty years. Some mining speculations in which he invested his money have failed, and brought this ruin upon us. I tell him not to despond; we can all work, if need be, and we all will."

Walter's voice was unsteady as he answered —

"What can I do? I would work if I could."

"As long as I have strength to work," answered Dr. Grey, "it will not make much difference; but if that should fail me, God help your mother, and the children. Walter, will you help them? Will you be a comfort to your mother, and a stay to your brothers and sisters?"

"Yes," said Walter, with downcast eyes, "I will try."

The father looked up doubtingly. He had loved

Walter all through his life, and trusted him even when there had seemed cause for doubt and suspicion; but now with all these new fears for his wife and children on his mind, startling misgivings of his firstborn would arise, and add one more bitter drop to the cup, which was already full to overflowing.

The mother's gentle faith and patience were stronger than her husband's in the hour of trial.

"John," she said, "we have been very happy; God has always cared for us, and watched over us; do not doubt but that He will do so still—that all will be ordered rightly, and for our good, although it looks so dark and dreary now."

The father looked into the gentle face which for six-and-twenty years had never failed to wear a smile for him, and took comfort.

"Walter," he said, "say nothing of this to your brothers and sisters,—they must know it some day or other, but not yet; and God's blessing be with you, my son, wherever you may be, and keep you in the right path."

Walter's first impulse was to throw himself at his father's feet, and confess all his unworthiness. The next moment he persuaded himself that there was no need to worry him that evening. The next morning when Dr. Grey drove him to the station, —as he always did—would be quite time enough to say anything he had to say.

Very early on the following morning Dr. Grey stood at his son's bedside.

"Walter, I am summoned some distance into the country; I am afraid I may hardly be back in time to see you off; so good-bye. My boy, be honest, and true, and God-fearing,—and never forget your mother's lessons."

And with one grasp of his son's hand, the good doctor took his departure.

"Perhaps," he mused, as he drove along the well-known road to his destination, "I may never see my boy again,—I am an old man now,—I see those younger than I am cut down, every day; and I don't feel so strong as I did;—but God only knows what the end may be."

He did see his son again. There were still bright days in store in the old home;—but the father would rather have stood at Walter's grave, than see him where he saw him ere many months had passed in utter misery and shame.

But the summer sun no longer shone upon the earth. The trees were no longer bright with verdure; nor the gardens gay with flowers when that time came; all was dark and dreary then;—but more desolate than the winter landscape—smitten with a keener blast than that which had left the trees all bare and leafless, were the hearts of those who loved Walter Grey.

## CHAPTER XI.

### HERMIONE ASSERTS HER INDEPENDENCE.

THE snow was falling thick and fast one day towards the middle of December. Miss Mortimer and Hermione sat in the comfortable little drawing-room, which wore a peculiarly cheerful home-like aspect. Hermione too appeared quite at her ease as she flitted about; and the old lady watched her graceful movements lovingly, and with a certain amount of pride. There was a colour in the girl's cheek now, and a bright light in her eyes, which, when last we saw her, were not there.

Truly time soothes all griefs. We would not tell it to the widow in the first hour of her bereavement, when all she had to lean upon in the wide world has been rudely taken from her; nor to the child bereft of its parent; nor to the parent who has con-

signed to the silent tomb the body of the son, or daughter who was dearer to him than life.

No, we would let them weep in the first moments of their bitter sorrow, without trying to check the grief that must have way; for we know that time will soften, if it will not heal the wounds which in the first days and months of their desolation seemed incurable.

It is a part of the Infinite mercy which has done all things well, that so it is; if it were not so, how could some amongst us rise from such miseries as one shrinks from contemplating, from the severance of such ties as seemed our only happiness on earth.

Perhaps there is a melancholy satisfaction in the feeling that all such sorrows are inevitable;—that the decree has gone forth, and no power of ours can alter it.

And surely there is unutterable comfort in the thought that as each day takes us, as it were, further from those we have loved, and lost, renders more indistinct the sacred memories which we thought would hover around all connected with them for ever; so each day carries us in reality nearer to them,—to that bright land where neither pain, nor sorrow, nor parting are known.

Miss Mortimer sat surrounded by all kinds of unmentionable garments, of every possible size and

shape,—her gifts to be dispensed to the poor of Redburn at the joyous Christmas season.

The entrance of John with the post-bag disturbed her. Hermione looked up anxiously. There seemed to be full confidence established between those two now.

Miss Mortimer proceeded to unlock the bag, and tossed away the newspaper, which was all it contained, with a gesture of impatience.

"Is there nothing from Italy?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing. It is very strange. I begin to think Nancy, that Randolph Douglas must be on his way home.

There was a quiver of Hermione's lip which told of intense agitation, as she busied herself with the garments before alluded to, and was silent.

Randolph Douglas had gone to Italy to try and find some clue to the mystery of Reginald Morton's marriage. All the inquiries conducted at home had failed, and this journey seemed to be the only chance of success left.

He had written constantly since his departure; at first vaguely, and almost hopelessly,—he could not even find the place were Mr. Morton had lived. All his letters had been addressed to Naples, and forwarded by a friend of his who was now dead; and in the neighbouring towns and villages, where Mr. Douglas had set on foot eager inquiries, it was difficult to find any clue to the English signor.

But the strain of Randolph's last letter had been very different; expressing hope almost amounting to certainty that all would be well, and promising to write again in two or three days.

More than ten days had elapsed since the receipt of that epistle. No wonder then that both Miss Mortimer and Hermione were sadly disappointed at the non-arrival of the promised missive.

"My dear," said the old lady after a long pause, "I hope it will come before Christmas Eve. I always ask the Grey's, and the Clarke's, and the Vicar's children to come to my Christmas tree,—I believe the silly young things look forward to it all the year round, and I don't like to disappoint them now. Shall you mind it, Nancy?"

Hermione looked up quickly. During all those months she had shunned all society but Winifred's, and it seemed hard to throw off the feeling now, and join a noisy Christmas party; but the young elastic spirit had risen from the first depths of sorrow, and the girl felt that to disappoint Miss Mortimer's little friends would be extreme selfishness; so she tried to enter into all the good old maid's little plans for the amusement of her guests.

"Perhaps Mr Douglas' letter will have arrived before that," she mused, "and then *one* weight will be removed."

So the invitations were issued, and the answers

came in due time; the Grey's note being brought, to Miss Mortimer's evident dissatisfaction by Walter, who was at home for his long leave.

He was wonderfully agreeable on that morning, there was not a trace of levity in his manners; and as Hermione listened to the quiet tones of the young officer's peculiarly melodious voice, and watched the ever varying expression of the handsome face, she, in her loneliness almost envied Winifred the possession of such a brother, and wondered whether his presence would chase away the shadow which now ever sat upon her friend's brow.

Perhaps it was the wish to see what effect Walter Grey's presence had had in his home, that caused Hermione to appear the next morning arrayed in hat and cloak, and announcing her intention of going to see how Winifred's cold was.

Miss Mortimer frowned,—then rose from her seat, and laid her hand upon the girl's arm, with the air of authority which none ever resisted.

"My dear, John shall take a note if you prefer it, but I do not choose you to go to Dr. Grey's without me at present."

Hermione's astonishment at the prohibition was unbounded; except in the routine of school, she had never yet known any restraint. The hot blood rose to her cheek, and she threw back her head indignantly. Her love for Winifred was deep

and true, and to be kept away from her now just to gratify some ridiculous, old-maidish scruple of Miss Mortimer's was more than she either could, or would endure.

"No one has a right to control my actions," she said, "to treat me as a child not to be trusted; and I will not stand it."

She looked so marvellously beautiful in her anger, —so like her father had looked when years before, his wrath had been roused by some accidental circumstance, that Miss Mortimer was powerless to speak; and Hermione had left the room, and had reached the end of the gravel path, before the old lady realized what it all meant.

The girl walked on quickly; revelling in the sense of liberty; chafing against the control which Miss Mortimer had sought to impose upon her, and vowing that she would never submit to such tyranny.

The shortest way to Dr. Grey's house was across the fields and through the churchyard.

There Hermione paused. Nothing was visible to her in the pale wintry light but one object; the pure white cross which marked her father's grave.

She stopped there as if fascinated; she dared not pass the spot most sacred to her on earth, with such angry feelings in her heart. She against whom she had so rebelled had loved *him*,—had been a friend to *her* for *his* sake when she had been left so lonely and so desolate.

The proud spirit was conquered after a short, fierce struggle.

With a heavy heart Hermione retraced her steps to the cottage, and stood at Miss Mortimer's side ere the latter was aware of her presence.

"I was wrong," she said, "I am very sorry; *you* have a right to control my actions,—the right of having shown me such kindness as God alone can reward you for."

Miss Mortimer's voice quivered as she answered—

"My dear, my manner is harsh; I did not mean to be tyrannical, but—"

Hermione's hand was placed before her old friend's mouth.

"Hush, you were not harsh, but you must learn to trust me."

And so the conversation ended.

That afternoon Miss Mortimer discovered that it was absolutely necessary that she should visit Mrs. Grey, and Hermione accompanied her, and paid Winifred a long visit in her own room.

That Walter's presence had rather added to, than chased away the gloom from her friend's brow, Hermione saw in an instant; all the girl's attempts to obtain Winifred's confidence were declined, but so kindly and affectionately, with such an expression of misery on the pale, sad face, that it was impossible to take offence at the inexplicable reserve.

Walter was away from home, for which Hermione felt thankful. She did not care to hear her friend's brother abused by Miss Mortimer during their homeward walk, and she felt that had he come across them, such would inevitably have been the result.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE POLAR BEAR.

CHRISTMAS Eve came, and brought no letter from Italy, but the Italian post was so irregular, that the delay was to be accounted for, and neither Miss Mortimer nor Hermione could believe that Mr. Douglas had not written.

The ground was still covered with snow, but the clear frosty air was bright and invigorating; and Christmas always brings a special joy of its own with it, even to those who may be saddened by the weight of many a care or sorrow; for the same blessing which more than eighteen hundred years ago, made the angels of Heaven rejoice, is with us always now,—brought more clearly to our minds as each successive Christmas season dawns upon the earth, telling the old story of "love and peace, and good will."

Very bright indeed looked Miss Mortimer's little

drawing-room on this particular Christmas Eve of which I am writing.

Cold and dark as might be the aspect of the outer world, all bright and glowing was the scene within.

There stood the beautiful tree with its "mantle of starry light," laden with the presents which kind Miss Mortimer had provided for her young guests. Clear, joyous voices rang through the room; somewhat noisily it must be confessed; but who ever heeds the noise made by children at Christmas-tide? And I'm not sure that on this occasion the elders did not assist considerably in the general clamour.

Good Dr. Grey's benevolent face was less careworn than when we last saw him; his health had improved, and he could be thankful for the present, and trust to a higher wisdom for the future.

Julia sat in a corner of the room, putting up, *faute de mieux*, with the attentions of a young Mr. Clarke, who wore exquisite lavender kids, and was cultivating a fiery moustache.

Winifred watched them with a smile of amusement on her face; she was still considered an invalid, and was made to sit in an arm-chair near the fire.

Truth to tell, she rather enjoyed the privilege of being silent.

Hermione stood at some little distance from her friend, listening eagerly to something Walter was saying.

Winifred for some reason felt anxious and uncomfortable when she looked at them.

She heard Walter talking of Italy, which Hermione had now learnt to look upon as the country of her birth; and she saw the flush of excitement on the girl's cheek, as Walter in glowing colours described the beauties of the bright, sunny land, which he had visited some eighteen months previously.

Miss Mortimer watched the pair also, and the intonation of her voice was anything but agreeable as she said—

"Now we will proceed to dispense these fairy gifts. Ralph, will you ask old John to bring in the high steps?"

Ralph obeyed; and at that moment there was a sharp, vigorous ring at the hall-bell.

The rooms in the cottage were situated on each side of the front door.

Ralph's boyish curiosity was aroused,—he thought it must be an arrival, and so indeed it proved.

A clear, manly voice asked to see Miss Mortimer.

Ralph caught sight of a tall figure, in a shaggy coat, covered from head to foot with snow, surmounted by a face which the boy had an indistinct idea he had seen somewhere before.

He contemplated the stranger as he stood on the door-step, listening to old John's prosy explanation

that his mistress was particularly engaged with company, and could not be disturbed.

The boy, like most boys, was a physiognomist. He read merriment, and no distaste for a joke in the new arrival's bright, brown eyes; and putting his hand quietly behind the old servant, he opened the door, and announced in a sepulchral voice—

"The Polar Bear."

There stood the stranger with all that blaze of light falling upon his snow-covered figure, whilst the inmates of the room were too much astonished to speak.

Ralph was rewarded for his boldness by seeing all the juveniles huddled into a corner, from which feeble cries of fright proceeded at intervals, and still more so by the evident embarassment of all the elders, including the "Polar Bear" himself.

Mr. Clarke who stood nearest the door was the first to break the silence.

"Most unaccountable young man," he murmured, "as I always thought."

But by this time Miss Mortimer had recognized Horace Durant and advanced to meet him with a lowering brow, and a menacing frown at Ralph.

Horace bowed politely, in answer to her somewhat stiff greeting, and requested a few minutes private conversation.

Miss Mortimer took him into the dining-room, and closed the door.

Then Horace handed her an envelope.

"Mr. Douglas returned from Italy that morning," he said, "he had pressing business in town, and he wanted this delivered into your own hands. He thought, and thought rightly, that it would give me pleasure to be the bearer of it; it is the certificate of Reginald Morton's marriage with Hermione Montefiero, on the 3rd August, 184—."

Miss Mortimer, strong minded though she was reputed to be, clung to a chair for support.

"Thank God," she said, in a voice trembling with emotion, "you must give it her yourself, young man; I said you were better than the rest of your sex."

She crossed the little passage, and in low, trembling tones said the one word—

"Hermione."

None but the girl herself noticed the change in the name.

The dropping of the "Nancy" told its own tale.

Hermione knew in an instant that the "Polar Bear" had brought good news to Redburn as a Christmas gift to her.

"Mr. Horace Durant,—Miss Morton."

Horace's presence of mind forsook him in that moment, far more than it had done when Ralph opened the drawing-room door, and disclosed his presence to all those people.

The bright vision was a reality; it seemed as

though the original of that exquisite picture, of which he had dreamt for months, stood before him in her gentle, womanly grace.

He handed her the paper awkwardly, and she read its contents.

There was a flush of triumphant joy upon her face, but words failed her; she darted up the staircase, and the sharp closing of a door proclaimed that she had shut herself up in her own room.

There in the light of the Christmas moon, she fell upon her knees, and thanked God for the mercy which had come to her.

She could hold up her head amongst the proudest of them now, none could ever again point at her with the finger of scorn; above all, *his* most precious memory was tainted now by no shadow of blame; the cold, harsh judging world could cast no slur upon his honor or his uprightness.

All was clear and bright now, there was no further cause for unhappiness, none but the one which must be with her all through her life, the knowledge that he never again would fold her in his arms, or call her his own child, as he had done for the first and last time on that August afternoon.

It seemed as though a new loveliness had come into her face, as when, that fervent thanksgiving over, she returned noiselessly to the drawing-room.

They all knew the cause of Horace Durant's visit.

Miss Mortimer had been too proud, and too happy to keep it to herself; but it was a subject on which very little could be said, only Winifred's warm, silent pressure of her hand, told Hermione how her friend rejoiced in her newly-found happiness.

Horace was looking so bright, and happy, that Mr. Clarke came to the conclusion that the "unaccountable young man" was not right in his mind, for of course he held to his quixotic ideas, and was the bearer of the document, which would make him a poor man again.

The children had taken entire possession of the stranger; introduced by Ralph, they looked upon him as their especial property, and he told them such marvellous stories of the fairies who had brought them the pretty gifts they were so eager to display, that the young Greys were in a fever of delight, and persuaded their father to invite the whole of the assembled company to a Christmas party two nights afterwards.

Horace feebly argued that he must return to London, but Miss Mortimer laid upon him her commands to stay, and he laughingly surrendered.

Once, when for an instant he stood alone, Hermione approached him, and tendered her warm, grateful thanks for all his kindness.

"We are cousins, Mr. Durant," she said in her softest, sweetest tone, "we must not think of each other as strangers."

Strangers! No! That face had been the companion of Horace's day-dreams, since the day he sat in the old library of Hovenden Grange.

After the awkwardness of the first moment, he looked upon the fair girl as a friend he had known for a long time.

The evening came to an end at last, as all such evenings must; although it was difficult to persuade the children that the old clock was on the stroke of twelve, and not ten, as they vainly tried to assert.

Horace sat with Miss Mortimer and Hermione for some time after the others had taken their departure.

He told them what he had heard from Randolph Douglas, and what we already know.

The lawyer had had no small trouble and difficulty in tracing the story of Reginald Morton's life, but he had alighted at last upon the little Italian village where the English signor's name was everywhere spoken of with such deep and unaffected regret, and where the memory of his fair young bride was cherished by those simple people, as a household treasure in their homes.

There were tears in the eyes of both his listeners as Horace told Randolph Douglas' tale, for one listened to the records of her father and mother, and the other, (wrinkled old maid though she was), drank in all that was told of the man she had never ceased to love.

*He* had loved another, but that was nought to her; his life had been brightened for a time, and she could be grateful to anyone who had brought peace to the manly heart, which she in her pride and wilfulness had so sorely bruised.

Horace walked through the snow to the little village inn where he had taken up his abode, feeling happier than he had done for months.

He was glad that the matter was settled,—that Hovenden Grange must now be Hermione's; for although there had been no mention of Reginald Morton's lawful heirs in that strange will, Horace would have looked upon anyone who kept possession of the property under existing circumstances, as little better than a thief.

He felt in a strangely perverse mood too;—how he had longed to see Hermione! Now his wish had been fulfilled; but his thoughts *would* revert to a pale, slight girl, who had sat so quietly in the arm-chair, seeming so loved by them all, sympathizing in all the childish joys and griefs,—showing such earnest, heartfelt joy in Hermione's happiness.

"She is a plain little thing," he mused, "and yet there is something about her which attracts one in spite of one's self. I could not help looking at her,—I think the charm must be in those wonderful grey eyes of her's, sometimes looking so wistful and sorrowful, then lighting up with such fire and

intensity. How I should like to fathom their depths,—they would be more difficult to penetrate, I imagine, even than my fair cousin's brilliant orbs."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### WHAT BECAME OF HOVENDEN GRANGE.

"A Merry Christmas to you, Nan—I mean Hermione, my dear," said Miss Mortimer, as the girl entered the breakfast-room, looking somewhat sorrowful, as she thought of the similar greeting bestowed upon her last year by the voice that was now hushed for ever; but still with a quiet serene light in the blue eyes, which the spinster had not seen there before.

On her plate stood a small casket, which she opened, and beheld a magnificent set of pearls.

"Oh, Miss Mortimer, thank you,—how lovely; but indeed they are too handsome for me."

"Hardly, for the heiress of Hovenden, my dear."

Hermione sighed, as though already oppressed with the weight of cares and wishes.

"I did not think it was certain," she said, "indeed

I do not want it,—Mr. Durant would manage it all much better than I should."

Miss Mortimer bit her lip. She had indulged in a romance by which both the young people were to retain possession of Hovenden Grange; but she knew Hermione too well to hint at such a possibility, and therefore answered—

"He will not take it,—I am sure he would think it neither right nor honest, from something he said last night; I think he wants it all settled at once,—so I have telegraphed to Randolph Douglas, to come and eat his Christmas dinner with us, then we can talk the matter over. You must not think me in too great a hurry, my dear, but I am an old woman now, and there is no telling what may happen."

Hermione's tears fell fast as she looked at the withered face before her. What should she do if the stern messenger which had robbed her of her father took away her kind old friend?

Miss Mortimer hurried her off to dress for church. She would not allow a cloud to overshadow the fair young face on such a day.

The little village sanctuary was decked with bright flowers and evergreens, symbols of the Christian's joy. The words of prayer, and the hymns of praise,—the echoes of the angels' song, rose soft and clear,—and again Hermione gave thanks for the mercy which had taken that one deep shadow from her young life.

There were others deeper and darker hanging over her then, but in the brightness of that present joy and thankfulness they were hidden from her eyes.

Randolph Douglas arrived just as the party at the cottage begun to despair of seeing him, and the grave lawyer's heart beat with a strange new feeling which he was at a loss to account for, as Hermione thanked him for all he had done for her.

Randolph was usually self-possessed, and at his ease, but on this occasion he muttered some unintelligible words about "pleasure, trouble, and duty," and turned to address Miss Mortimer.

Hermione glanced at both the visitors as they stood in true English fashion on the hearthrug, waiting the announcement of dinner,—at Horace, with his honest, open face, with all the fire and buoyancy of early manhood, at the smile so full of sunshine with which he answered some characteristic remarks of Miss Mortimer's; then her eye fell upon Randolph, pale and grave-looking, with a slight expression of sarcasm playing round his mouth, and a proud curl of the short upper lip, with streaks of grey too, in the raven hair, and yet with a gentle look in the dark piercing eyes which could sometimes flash with such intensity of fire, and with an expression of such deep, earnest thought over the whole face.

The girl's eye rested approvingly on Horace, then wandered on with an expression of deep curiosity and interest to the grave-looking lawyer.

Randolph, before dinner was half over, confessed to himself that his only safety lay in returning to town by the mail train.

But there was business to be transacted on the morrow, which precluded all possibility of such a thing.

Christmas Day had fallen on a Thursday,—there was not the smallest chance of his being able to get to London until Saturday.

"I suppose Durant will stay here," he mused.

The thought cost him a severe pang; for after all what could be more natural then that those two should fall in love with each other, and so share Hovenden Grange and Mr. Morton's riches.

But there is a game called "cross-purposes," and people will play at it, whatever the world may say; truly *l'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.*

The day after Christmas Day, the law business was all settled.

There was an immense amount of talking; I cannot pretend to enter into all the legal technicalities which were brought forward by Randolph Douglas and Mr. Clarke; if I attempted such a thing I should make a most lamentable display of my own ignorance in such matters; but I will simply state facts as they

stood, when, after a discussion which had lasted several hours, huge seals and pink tape were attached to sundry pieces of parchment.

Hermione wanted the property to be divided, and thought that Horace would make a much better master of Hovenden Grange, than she should, a mistress. Whereat the listeners smiled, and looked mysterious, as people will do on such occasions; for in their hearts they felt sure that the old mansion would be the joint property of the young people before very long.

At last the matter stood thus—

Impetuous Horace threw the will into the fire, and Hermione was undisputed mistress of Hovenden Grange and £7000 a year; and £1000 a year was settled by a deed of gift from her, on her cousin, Horace Durant, and his heirs for ever.

She thought herself a mean, pitiful creature, for not having insisted upon his taking at least half her fortune, but he had shown as much determination as she had, and had for a long time refused to accept a farthing more than the legacy which was his by right.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### DR. GREY'S PARTY.

DR. GREY'S party was as great a success in its way as Miss Mortimer's had been; it was composed of the same guests,—Randolph Douglas being the only addition.

Walter had looked forward to that evening with intense delight.

I don't like Walter Grey, and I don't want you to like him, fair reader, but I must do him this amount of justice at once, lest in all that is coming I may forget it, and let my prejudices overcome my better judgment.

He loved Hermione more truly than he had ever loved anyone before,—had she been penniless—had the stain been still upon her name, I am sure his love would have been the same.

He did not talk to her very much on that evening,

but whenever he did address her in his peculiarly low, sweet voice, he made her feel how he hung upon her every word,—he anxiously waited for her answer to his trivial remarks.

She had never been into the world before,—had hardly ever spoken to anyone beyond her schoolfellows. She had a woman's share of vanity, and love of admiration, to which none knew better than Walter Grey how to administer; open flattery she would at once have recoiled from, but the courteous, deferential manner pleased her.

Mr. Douglas watched them anxiously, and was more silent and reserved than ever.

Horace did not trouble himself about them; he romped with the children, and narrated the most wonderful anecdotes to Julia, to which she listened with rapt attention, and as her brothers expressed it—"swallowed."

Only sometimes his eye wandered to where Winifred sat, and when towards the end of the evening he saw a vacant chair next her's, he instantly took possession of it.

They talked chiefly of Hermione, and Horace could not fail to see the anxious look which came upon the pale face as Walter engaged the heiress in a long conversation.

Miss Mortimer called Hermione sharply to her side.

The girl walked across the room with the air of a duchess,—answered the old maid's trivial question quietly, and went up to Winifred.

Horace rose and gave her his chair,—she bent forward eagerly.

"Winifred, dearest," she said, "I cannot bear it any longer;—why do you look so pale and sad? tell me,—I *will* know."

"I am ill," answered Winifred, dreamily.

"Yes, I know you are ill, but no illness in the world ought to make you so unlike yourself."

"Perhaps not, but I have had home cares and worries, and although most of them are removed now, I still feel unhappy; I don't know why I should be so, but there is ever a foreboding of some great coming sorrow hanging over me; it has been there now for many weeks, weighing me down; seeming to crush all hope out of me;—I try to chase it away,—to tell myself that it is a want of faith and trust, but it *will* come back, each day it seems to be more real."

There was a general move. Miss Mortimer was summoning Hermione, and Walter's arm was offered to the heiress.

Winifred caught her friend's hand convulsively, and drew her towards her. The tones of her voice were hasty and unnatural as she said—

"Hermione, you say you love me, promise never to keep anything from me."

Hermione could not answer to herself for the strange unaccountable feeling which prevented her making such a promise; a week before there would not have been a thought in her heart which she would have wished to conceal from her friend.

She was saved answering the question. One or two hands were held out to wish Winifred "Good-night," and express a hope that she would soon be better.

Hermione waited to the last, then stooped down, and gave her one silent kiss, but no word was spoken by either.

Many a time afterwards was Hermione haunted by the memory of those wistful grey eyes beseeching for the promise, which had she given it, might have saved her days and hours of future misery.

"It is good-night, and good-bye," said Horace, as he stood with Randolph Douglas at the door of the cottage.

"So soon?" said Hermione, "but you must come down again. I do not feel that I have seen half enough of my cousin."

"Nor I neither," answered Horace in his cheerful, hearty voice, "with Miss Mortimer's permission I will soon come and pay you another visit."

Miss Mortimer's invitation was cordial in the extreme.

Randolph could not resist a smile.

"Poor old lady," he soliloquized, "she will be doomed to disappointment. I can see that Miss Morton will not be talked into anything."

There were a few more common-place words spoken,—cordial farewells exchanged, then they parted, and the next morning the two young men returned to town.

They were walking the next day in the direction of Horace's lodgings, when Randolph suddenly said—

"What are you going to do with yourself, Durant?"

"What! to-day, do you mean?"

"No, I mean as to the future. You can afford to amuse yourself now."

"Well, I think I must go and see a little of the world,—go to France, Italy, Spain,—to Timbuctoo, perhaps. You may come with me and decide my route if you like. When I come home again I don't know what may happen; perhaps I may turn farmer; and then I have a fancy for superintending the repairs at Hovenden Grange. What do you say to it?"

"That I should think Miss Morton would be very glad of your assistance."

All traces of jealousy of Horace had disappeared from Randolph's breast.

"Old fellow," he said, and Horace could not imagine why his friend looked so grave and anxious, "if you are down at Redburn, keep a sharp look

out on the heiress; you don't know the wickedness of the world, Durant, or the sins money may tempt a man to commit."

And before Horace could ask for an explanation, Mr. Douglas had turned down another street.

Horace smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. He was accustomed to his friend's somewhat eccentric moods, and remembered that he had said he had to keep an appointment, which he supposed accounted for his hurrying away.

## CHAPTER XV.

### TIM'S COUSIN.

"TIM," cried Horace, as he opened the door of his old lodgings.

But Tim was not to be found, and Horace guessing his whereabouts, went out into the street again, and passed over to the opposite side,—to the wretched house where the boy's formidable aunt still flourished.

The young man entered the dark, dingy room unperceived by its occupants, and feeling that his presence would be an intrusion, stood noiselessly in the doorway and watched the scene within.

On a little low trussle bed lay Tim's cousin Ben, a lad of about ten years of age, with an old thin, wizened little face, and limbs that seemed hardly capable of supporting the frame,—tiny though it was.

The faint, sickly winter sunlight streamed in through a chink in the dirty window, and fell upon the cripple's lank, sandy hair, and upon Tim's black locks, as he too sat upon the bed, and with rough tenderness made his little cousin lean against him.

"Read it again," said the child eagerly, and Tim stumblingly and hesitatingly read—what Horace could not hear, but when he had laid down the book, he saw that it was a Bible.

The child looked up with a flush of excitement on his little thin face.

"Oh, it must be a beautiful place, Tim," he said, "where the sun, and the moon, and the stars are for ever shining, and where there is no sickness nor pain. Do you think, Tim, that God will let me go there?"

"I asked master," said Tim, "and he showed me what Jesus Christ said,—I will read it to you.

He fumbled over the leaves of his Bible, and at last read—

"Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.'

Then a light as of a new hope came upon the little wasted features, and Ben joined his thin hands in prayer.

"Our Father," he began, and with Tim's help, went to the end of the Divinely-taught prayer.

Then weary and exhausted, he sank back upon

the hard bed, and Tim with a loving, gentle hand smoothed the pillow, and tried to make the poor little fellow more comfortable.

"I say, Tim," said the little lad after a pause, "'twill be a greater change for such as we, going to the beautiful city, than for them who live in grand houses, and always see the grand fields, and the trees, and the flowers."

And he gazed round the room, and seemed as though he wished to trace the rays of that one faint gleam of sunshine, as if its brightness would give him some faint idea of the everlasting loveliness for which he pined.

Horace retreated silently, and returned to his room. Those few months had wrought a change in all his life and feelings, and as he had listened to the little ignorant boy of five months back, carrying comfort to the dying bed of the crippled child, he felt humbly grateful for the spirit which had prompted him to rescue at least one soul from infamy and shame.

With his increased means he felt that there ought to be increased responsibilities, and so he mused upon them, and I am bound to confess, fell asleep at last, to dream of Utopian schemes, which perhaps would some day be realized.

Very soon the cold wintry wind blew upon a cold wintry grave, in a desolate London churchyard,

where little Ben was laid to his rest; but the darkness was nought to him now, for he knew what the brightness of the sun was like, in the beautiful city, which never needs the light.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE WALK UNDER THE OLD ELMS.

THE shortest January day had nearly closed. Masons and carpenters packed up their tools and stowed them into an old room in Hovenden Grange, well pleased that the day's work was at an end, and thinking that the old place would be pleasant enough to work at in summer, although now it was rather dreary and desolate. However, the repairs would take some time to accomplish, and probably the bright spring-days would have returned before they were completed.

Miss Mortimer had insisted upon their being set on foot at once. She was anxious that Hermione should assume her rights as soon as possible; and the old house was to be beautified within and without previous to her taking possession.

On that afternoon Hermione herself walked

quickly up the broad avenue of elms which led to the side door of the mansion, and anxiously watched the last workman disappear.

Then she looked round nervously, and drew up her slight, graceful figure to its full height, as if by so doing she could more easily discern any distant object. She grew impatient at last,—took out her watch frequently,—then with an impatient gesture walked away as if in despair.

But a quick footstep approached from the opposite direction to that on which her gaze had been fixed, —then looking eager and happy, she turned quickly round, with a bright flush on her cheek, and Walter Grey was at her side.

There was that in the manner of both which showed that such meetings were not by any means rare events.

"My darling," he said, as he drew her shawl more closely round her, "I hardly thought you would brave this wretched afternoon."

"I would not have done it for any one else in the world but you, Walter; I don't think there is anything I would not do for you."

"Would you brave anything for me, Hermione?" said Walter, eagerly, "Some day I may have to ask you to brave the world's opinion for my sake."

He had often spoken in this vague, ambiguous way, and she was not alarmed at it now; she suf-

fered him to place her arm in his, and so they walked up and down beneath the old elms, while the leafless branches murmured above them, as though they were chanting a strange, low, melancholy dirge. They heeded not the minutes as they flew by, as the winter's afternoon sank into the darkness of evening; to be together was light, and joy, and forgetfulness.

How it had all begun, Hermione could hardly remember; once or twice she had met Walter in her walks, and they had exchanged a few ordinary words, then after a little time he had joined her, and at last he told her of his deep, unalterable love, and had heard her whispered confession that he was dearer to her than anyone else in the wide world. He had urged her not to speak to Miss Mortimer at present, but her nature had recoiled from the shadow of deceit, and she told him that she must do it.

It was in vain that he tried to convince her of the old lady's prejudice against him, and the obstacles which she would be sure to raise to their engagement,—Hermione was inexorable.

"It does not matter," she said, "I must do what I know to be right, and in less than two years I shall be my own mistress; surely you can trust me, Walter!"

Trust her he certainly did, but to wait two years was the last thing to be thought of; there seemed,

however, no present alternative, so he let her go home, and waited in fear and trembling for the result of the interview.

So Hermione began to Miss Mortimer the very next morning.

"I want to tell you that yesterday when I was out, I met Mr. Grey, and—and—"

"Hermione, never on pain of my most severe displeasure, mention that young man's name in my presence; it displeases me,—he is not worth talking about."

"But indeed you must hear this."

Miss Mortimer was painfully excited—

"I tell you, child, I will not hear his name,—a heartless, unprincipled coxcomb."

Hermione tried to restrain her rising anger.

"Then remember, Miss Mortimer, if ever in the future, you feel inclined to blame me, I tried to do what was right, and you kept me from it."

But Miss Mortimer on that occasion must have been mentally blind, for she collected her work, and strode out of the room. All those former chance meetings were unknown to her; it did not at all enter into the old maid's philosophy, to believe it possible that any young lady could entertain any but the most ordinary feelings of civility towards a man she had met only on two or three occasions, and who she (Miss Mortimer) had on every possible

opportunity taken care to abuse as the most selfish and obnoxious of men.

Poor Miss Mortimer! She certainly in this instance showed very little knowledge of the world; perhaps, truth to tell, she had damaged her own cause, by exciting Hermione's quick, warm feelings of compassion, in behalf of one whom she considered unjustly abused.

The next day Walter was told how her offered confidence had been so sternly rejected, and he secretly triumphed in Miss Mortimer's obstinate refusal to hear even the mention of his name.

And Winifred, the loving, self-denying sister, the faithful friend, why was she not told of all that was going on?

Because both Walter and Hermione had an instinctive feeling that she would disapprove of it,—why she should do so Hermione could not conceive; but Walter's conscience told him how many were the reasons known to Winifred which would make her shrink from the knowledge that he had obtained Hermione's love;—no wonder then that *he* was silent!

So matters had gone on until the afternoon, on which the lovers met beneath the old elms.

"I must be going away soon, my dearest," said Walter, as a sharp, pelting shower roused them from their dream of happiness, and caused them to hasten

their steps in the direction of Redburn, "we must decide something before I leave. Hermione, say again what you said just now,—that you would brave anything for my sake.

The eyes so full of tenderness were lifted to his face, but at that moment the shadow of a nameless fear fell upon the girl's heart.

"Anything in the world, Walter, dearest,"—then she paused, and added in tremulous tones, "you would never ask me to do anything wrong, would you, Walter?"

He evaded the question, and once more wrapping her shawl round her, and bidding her take care of herself, they parted,—agreeing to meet again in two days.

Hermione walked home uneasily; feeling that all this could not last much longer. Walter would be away, and she must write to him, and hear from him,—and how was it to be accomplished without entering upon a fresh course of deceit, every step of which was revolting to her better nature.

She heard voices in the drawing-room as she entered the cottage,—one was Miss Mortimer's, the other she did not recognize for an instant,—she thought it must be Dr. Grey,—she paused and listened, then came a hearty, ringing laugh, which could belong to none other than Horace Durant.

She wished him anywhere rather than there just now; he would be in her way, in Walter's, in every-

one's. What could have brought him back again so soon? She ran up stairs and took off her hat, and smoothed her hair. She started at the sight of her own face in the glass, it looked so worn, and anxious, and miserable.

She had complained of headache in the morning and was glad when she remembered that she had done so,—it might serve as an excuse for her wretched appearance now.

Horace greeted her warmly, but somehow she could not find words in which to welcome him,—it was an intense relief when Miss Mortimer said—

"Oh, my dear, I told Mr. Durant how bad your head was, and I supposed you were lying down, so I would not have you disturbed. Did you ever see such pale cheeks, Mr. Durant?"

But the face upon which Horace looked was dyed with crimson blushes, and in that moment Randolph Douglas' warning came to his friend's mind.

He saw that Hermione was ill at ease, and tried to change the subject of conversation.

"You are astonished to see me, are you not?"

"Yes," was the low, timid answer.

Miss Mortimer watched the scene, and drew from it the most favourable auguries.

Hermione was certainly embarassed at the meeting, and of Horace's feelings there could be no doubt. What else could have brought him back to Redburn so soon?

"Well, truth to tell," he continued, "London is insufferably dull. Douglas is out of town, and I felt lazy, and disinclined for work; then Tim—the little fellow I told you about—lost a little cousin, soon after Christmas, and is very much cut up about it; he refused to eat even pork-pies, and showed such manifest signs of wanting country air, that I thought it would do him good to bring him down here for a few days, so we have taken up our quarters at the 'Swan,' where I left Tim devouring a hunch of bread and cheese."

"Poor little fellow," said Hermione, and then there was another pause.

"So I hear the Grange is progressing; architectural improvements are rather in my line,—have I your permission to superintend during my stay at Redburn?"

"Certainly; do anything you like," but Hermione's voice was strained and unnatural, and Miss Mortimer and Horace sustained the burden of conversation during the rest of the evening.

He refused the pressing invitation to stay and partake of their early tea, on the plea that he must look after Tim, and consult Dr. Grey about him.

"By the bye," he said, "has young Grey left Redburn?"

The question was addressed to Hermione, but Miss Mortimer answered it.

"We know nothing of the young man's proceedings; Winifred does not come here so often when he is at home, and we do not go there."

"Miss Grey is better, I hope?"

"Not much,—she will be though, as soon as Walter goes; I have always noticed that he brings a cloud with him whenever he comes home."

Hermione bit her lips. To hear Walter, her idol, her dearest, thus spoken of, was more than she could endure, but she restrained herself from saying the burning, passionate, defiant words that were struggling for utterance, and as soon as Horace had left the house, she kissed Miss Mortimer, and said that her head ached so, she must go to bed.

The waking from the restless, troubled sleep was equally miserable, and the next morning Hermione appeared, looking even more wretched than she had done the previous evening. There must be an end to it all soon; she felt she could not stand it much longer; she, who had always shrunk from the petty deceits some of the girls had sometimes practised at school, to live as she felt she was now living—a lie in the sight of all who loved and trusted her—the misery and degradation were more than she was able to bear. She would give up anything to be rid of this burden—anything but Walter's love;—there lay the snare that was leading her on, whither—into what further deceit, she dared not enquire.

Horace was at the cottage early, and they all walked to the Grange together. The time passed quickly enough in going over the old rooms, and inspecting what had already been done, but Hermione was listless and indifferent. Miss Mortimer pitied her headache, and Horace looked at her searchingly; disagreeable suspicions had been aroused in his mind, by Walter Grey's start of something more than surprise, as he met him accidentally at the corner of the street. He had mistrusted the handsome young officer from the first, and he had not failed to notice Hermione's look of agitation when his name had been mentioned on the previous evening.

"I have had a letter from Douglas," he said; "he is staying at Seacombe; he wants to know if I can go over and spend the day there to-morrow. Do you think it would be feasible?"

Hermione was eager in an instant. Of course it was quite possible, and there were horses in the stable at his disposal,—he had but to tell the groom at what time he should like to ride.

Miss Mortimer ventured to suggest that the weather was not very favourable for a ten miles ride, but Horace and Hermione laughed at her fears, and it was settled that he should start the next day at noon.

Hermione's heart bounded when the matter was definitely arranged.

"By the bye, Hermione," said Horace, "Dr. Grey's prescription for Tim is country air from morning till night. May he have the range of Hovenden Grange?"

"Certainly; I hope the poor little fellow is better!"

"Oh, yes, thank you, he will be all right in a day or two."

"Please, sir," said Tim that evening, "what's a pic-nic? The little boy here says that their school has such a pic-nic in the summer, all under the trees; and he laughed so when I asked him what it was."

Horace had some difficulty in not showing his participation in the little boy's feelings of amusement, but at last managed to explain that a pic-nic was an entertainment at which people took out their dinner in baskets, and ate it sitting on the grass, under the trees, and he also promised Tim that if he conducted himself properly, he should perhaps bring him to Redburn for this identical school pic-nic.

Whereat Tim's delight knew no bounds, but was considerably damped by the recollection that five long months must elapse, before he could experience such bliss as that of eating his dinner under a tree.

"But why should it be so long?" mused the boy as he lay awake;—and a project grew, and was matured in his young brain, which was put into execution the next day.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### TIM'S PIC-NIC.

PUNCTUALLY at twelve o'clock Horace mounted his horse, telling Tim to take care of himself, and not to expect him back until eight o'clock.

The day was lovely as a January day could be,—bright, clear, and soft,—such a day as sometimes dawns upon us to cheer us through the long, dreary winter with a promise of spring.

No sooner had his master fairly set off, than Tim proceeded to the execution of his grand design.

"Mrs. James," he said to the good-natured landlady, "I'm going to a pic-nic,—will you lend me a basket to carry my dinner in?"

"Bless my heart!" ejaculated Mrs. James, "who ever heard of such a thing in the depth of winter!"

But by degrees Tim persuaded her into looking upon the affair in a more rational light. The bas-

ket was duly packed up, and a rug was lent to the boy, upon which he was instructed to sit. He had a doubt as to whether such a proceeding would be quite orthodox,—but upon being assured that the grass would give him his death of cold, he yielded, and trudged off towards the Grange as happy as a king.

He thought he should have liked a companion, but he had given a hint of his intentions to little John James, who had looked so staggered at the idea of such a thing, that Tim thought it wiser to drop the subject.

"Why a pic-nic! there ain't a leaf on the trees."

And what does that matter?"—the young cockney had answered with an air of supreme importance —"you don't eat leaves do you?"

This argument was incontrovertible. John walked away, laughing at the Londoner's strange ideas of rural felicity; Tim made choice of a suitable spot, upon which to spread his rug, then proceeded to unpack the basket, containing the provisions which good Mrs. James had provided for him. He thought he had never tasted anything like that cold beef, and he would have termed the apple-tart ambrosian, had such a word been in his vocabulary; as it was not, he contented himself with the greatest amount of praise he could bestow.

"My eyes, ain't it stunning! pork-pies is nothing

to it!" He dawdled over the meal as long as he possibly could, revelling in the sense of freedom and liberty, then he proceeded to climb the tallest tree he could find, and being remarkably nimble and active, he accomplished the ascent wonderfully. As he sat perched there, higher than he had ever been in his life before, seeming to himself to be mid-way between earth and heaven, he wondered whether there were any trees which reached up as high as where little Ben was, and thought how he should like to climb them if there were; the bright country made him think of the happy land his little cousin had so often talked of.

In the midst of his reverie, a squirrel jumped on the opposite branch of the tree, and with its little glistening, impudent eyes seemed to defy him to a race. He accepted the challenge instantly,—slid down the rugged trunk, to the infinite detriment of sundry parts of his attire, and then bounded over the grass in pursuit of the fleet little thing.

The chase was unsuccessful, and from sheer exhaustion Tim at last gave it up, and walked on slowly towards the house, wondering by the way whether all pic-nics were as delightful as this had been. It was getting cold and stormy now,—there was a lurid look in the sky which threatened a coming storm,—winter had asserted its right again, after the beauty of the spring-like morning.

Tim amused himself watching the workmen on the tall scaffolding,—then wearied out with the unusual amount of air and exercise, he ensconced himself in a snug corner of the porch,—covered himself up with Mrs. James' friendly rug, and in a short time fell fast asleep. He did not wake up for more than two hours, and probably would not have done so then, had not the sound of voices, and the mention of a familiar name, roused him from his slumbers.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### IT MUST BE NOW OR NEVER.

WITH a beating heart Hermione kept her appointment on that afternoon. She had seen Winifred in the morning, and again those wistful, sorrowful eyes made her feel very sad. There had been no time for private conversation;—their meeting had been at the cottage, where Winifred, tempted out by the beauty of the day, had accompanied her mother to call on Miss Mortimer.

The poor girl went home in despair. What mystery was brewing now? Why did Walter shun her society and seek out Julia, whom he had formerly somewhat neglected? Why did he avoid mentioning Hermione's name? Why did Hermione herself bear the impress of some secret care upon her lovely face? Anything would be better than such dreadful doubts,—even the certainty of evil.

So Winifred reasoned,—so man ever reasons in his ignorance; then when the dread secret is made clear, what would he not give for his former uncertainty, however wretched and wearing it may have been?

Ere the hours of that day had closed, Winifred knew all, and the knowledge was unutterable misery.

Walter was at the Grange before his time on that afternoon,—it was his turn to wait until Hermione appeared. She came in sight at last, walking with languid footsteps,—and he went forward to meet her with more than usual impetuosity in his manner.

She laid her head on his shoulder, as if to be there were her only rest, and murmured, "Oh, Walter, I am so wretched!"

It needed not those few words to tell how she had suffered; and as Walter looked into the pale face, which told of such intense agony, a softer expression came over the handsome features, which were marked by the hard lines of selfishness.

"My own dearest," he said soothingly, "it will be better soon;—Hermione, there must be no delay,—I must tell you now what you must do, if you wish to save us both from years of misery."

An old man passed and eyed the lovers cautiously.

"Come," said Hermione, impatiently, "into the porch,—we shall be undisturbed there."

So they stood in the porch where Tim lay curled up and covered with the rug.

"Now then speak, Walter, I must not be away long to-day."

He seemed to hesitate at first; perhaps there was some feeling of compunction left him,—some regret for the unhappy fate to which he was seeking to link that fair young girl, who clung to him with such loving trust; but necessity gave him courage at last, and when he spoke it was with passionate eloquence—

"Hermione, my own! it is for you to decide whether to-morrow you will be mine for ever, or whether now, from this very moment we must part, never to meet again. You know what our life away from each other must be—you know the agony even of hours of separation,—it is for you to decide, but it must be done at once."

"How?" asked the soft, trembling voice.

"By coming away with me this very night, and ere to-morrow's sun sets, being so irrevocably mine, that no power on earth can separate us. Dearest, they are seeking to marry you to Horace Durant; they will persecute you—teaze you—leave you no peace. You know what Miss Mortimer is; her unfounded hatred of me; her insane affection for this stranger—this scamp—this adventurer;—Hush! what moved?"

"Nothing, only my dress. But Walter, you are wrong; they would never talk me into marrying

him, although he is neither a scamp, nor an adventurer, but a noble self-sacrificing man."

Walter grew impatient. "He may be an angel for all I care, so long as he is nothing to you. But Hermione, listen, I speak no idle words; come away with me to-night,—be at the lodge gates at twelve o'clock, or give me up for ever. I know," he continued quickly, "that I am asking a sacrifice at your hands, for which the cruel, harsh-judging world will condemn me; for the penniless lieutenant is asking the heiress of Hovenden to bestow her wealth upon him. Think it all over, Hermione,—weigh the cost well. Perhaps you had better throw me over; but remember your decision must be final, it must be to-night or never."

He had touched the right chord in the young, generous heart, when he talked of *her* riches, and *his* poverty; he saw his advantage, and secretly triumphed.

"Walter, I would give up anything for your sake, only have patience."

An oath rose to his lips, but he checked it, and gave vent to a gesture of impatience, and there was a sad reproachful look on his face.

"Hermione," he said, "I give you five minutes to decide *my* fate, and *your's*."

He walked away and left her standing in the porch—on the threshold of her father's old home,

where all spoke of him, where even the tall trees upon which she gazed recalled his presence, and his memory. For his sake she must resist this fearful temptation to wrong. Then came the remembrance of her loneliness,—next of her riches. There was no one in all the wide world to whom she belonged,—no one but Walter, who loved her first and best. For had he not told her that on that sad August evening, when he had first seen her in the cottage-garden,—when shame and dishonour were on her name, he had felt that even then he would have given all he had in the world to call her his. Never again could she expect to meet with such noble, disinterested affection; dared she—could she wantonly trifle with it?"

Then came a struggle so sharp that it brought cold drops of agony to the fair young brow—the struggle between right and wrong.

The minutes flew quickly by. When Walter returned to her side, he looked upon a ghastly face, but the little hand was held out to him trustingly, and the gentle voice said,—"Walter, if it must be, I will do as you wish."

Yes, wrong had triumphed. The young, innocent girl who had never known a mother's wise, womanly counsels, gave way when temptation came. Judge her mercifully you who would be harsh, and censorious,—ask yourselves what you might have done,

had not a loving, warning eye watched over your tender girlhood?

Walter spoke his thanks warmly, and passionately.

"To-night at twelve o'clock at the lodge gates," were his last words; he appeared hurried, and anxious now that all was settled as he wished.

"My poor child," he mused, as he walked homewards, "surely it will be all right; to-morrow I shall be safe; then I will begin a new life,—I will reward her for all she is going through. She shall never know that she married a—"; a dark cloud was on his brow, as the name to which his deeds had earned him a title came to his mind, and he strode impatiently homewards, little thinking that that was the last night he should ever walk home through the deepening twilight, to the old house where he had lived all the years of his life. He was tender and gentle towards his mother and Winifred, more than usually respectful to his father, bright and amusing with the others. Winifred looked on wonderingly,—was the cloud to roll away which had darkened her life for months, or was it only a transient gleam of sunshine coming after the fury of the storm?

Hermione stood where Walter had left her; then after a moment's thought she entered the old house, and found her way to a room which had been allotted to old Molly. More infirm and decrepid

than ever looked the poor old servant, hardly even raising her head to greet Hermione's entrance. The girl stood and talked to her for some minutes, receiving only vague, unintelligible answers; and at last she wished her "good-bye," and took the old wizened hand in her's, gently and tenderly. There must have been something in the tone and manner which roused Molly's dormant faculties,—she looked straight into the lovely face which was bending over her's, and said—"Good-bye, my dear,—God bless you, and keep you safe, for your good father's sake;" and with this benediction ringing in her ears, Hermione pursued her way to the cottage.

How she went through the long evening that followed was a marvel to herself. She, too, was brighter, and more engaging than usual, and good Miss Mortimer looked at her lovingly, and thought what a happy man Horace Durant would be, if he succeeded in winning such a prize. She did not notice the tears which rose to the beautiful eyes whenever any allusion to the morrow was made,—that morrow on which they would all know how deceitful she had been; how she had wronged all their love and kindness. Even the unusually affectionate kiss failed to attract Miss Mortimer's particular attention, as with a heart heavier than it had been even in the earliest days of her great bereavement, Hermione retired to the little room which

had sheltered her when she had no home on earth.

She wrote a letter to Miss Mortimer, telling her of the step she meditated, thanking her for all her care and kindness, and asking her forgiveness for the great wrong she was about to commit. She thought of the misery those few lines would inflict upon the kind old heart,—of the tears which would dim the eyes which had shed so many for her father's sake. She thought too of Winifred,—but she would come back to them all soon, to be a living child to Miss Mortimer, a sister in name as she had hitherto been in affection to Winifred, and she knelt and asked the more Merciful than all to keep her, and all she loved from harm.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### HORACE DISMISSES THE POST-BOY.

TIM watched his master's return with considerable impatience. Almost every word of the conversation in the porch had been clearly understood by him; the mention of Horace's name had effectually roused him, and he had a vague idea that in some way or other, Horace would be wronged.

"Please, sir," were his first words, when Horace at nine o'clock dismounted from his horse, and walked cold and miserable into the little parlor of the inn, "do you know a young woman called Her—Her—*Hermony*, and a young man called Walter?"

At any other time, Horace would have resented the seeming impertinence, but the strange coupling of those names by such a person as Tim, instantly roused his anxiety.

"Yes, I know them,—what of them?"

Then Tim told of his pic-nic, and subsequent slumber in the porch of Hovenden Grange, and of the appointment he had heard made.

Somehow the boy had an innate feeling of delicacy in him, and he could not bring himself to tell his master that he had heard him called a scamp, etc.

Horace listened breathlessly to the recital, and when it was ended, said—"So you turned eavesdropper, Tim,—that was not right."

The boy looked up and answered truthfully—

"I was half-asleep first, please, sir; and at first I thought I was a dreaming, and then I heard your name, and I moved to let the parties know I was there, and the young man looked so awful fierce—I was afraid."

Horace did not care to hear what had been said about him. "Now, Tim, answer me; have you told anyone what you heard?"

"No, sir," answered the boy, "I did not think you would like it."

"Very well; I feel I can trust you; you must never breathe a word of it to living mortal."

"I promise, sir, I never will."

"That's a good boy; now go to bed. I hope your January pic-nic will not have given you a bad cold."

"Oh, no, sir; it was so awful jolly;"—and Tim obeyed his master's orders, and retired for the night.

Horace was sorely puzzled to know what to do. His first impulse was to go to Hermione, and tell her what he had heard,—but for many reasons this would hardly be possible; he could not see the girl alone, and he could not bring such a charge against her on such authority; even now there might be a chance that Tim was mistaken. It seemed unlikely that he could have invented any part of his tale; still Horace clung lingeringly to the hope that there was some strange misunderstanding, and he dared not insult Hermione by convicting her of participation in a plot in which she might really be, at least, partially innocent.

So he made up his mind to go to the lodge gates; judge for himself of the truth of the boy's story, and prevent if need be, the execution of a deed which he felt would bring life-long misery to Hermione. At all risks she must be saved. Distant though their relationship was, she appeared to have none nearer than himself; and it seemed to be his right and duty to protect her from such a man as he believed Walter Grey to be. "Let him win her honorably," he thought, "and then, much as I dislike the fellow, it will be no business of mine to interfere; but to steal her away in the dead of night, when he has never even openly urged his suit, shows that there is mischief and villainy of some kind brewing."

He put on his great coat,—armed himself with

his stout stick, and walked out in the direction of the lodge gates.

Quick flashes of lightning shone through the darkness, and distant peals of thunder broke the stillness of the silent night,—but Horace heeded not the impending storm, as he hurried onwards to his destination.

He reached it, and there was no sign of life around,—no sound but of the far-off thunder, and ever and anon the sweet chimes of the village church told out the hours. Eleven o'clock struck,—then the quarter past, then half-past, then the quarter to twelve; then Horace looked round him anxiously, for it seemed as though in the distance he distinguished another sound—not this time the echo of the storm, but the rumble of carriage wheels.

Two steady lights appeared in the distance, each moment drawing nearer, and at last the vehicle drew up at the lodge gates, and the post-boy jumped from his seat, and stood at the horses' heads. Horace held his breath, and strong man though he was, his heart beat quickly, for Tim's strange tale was receiving confirmation.

He walked up the road a little, and suddenly stopped, for in the distance he saw a figure approaching,—a tall, slight form; there was no mistaking the peculiarly graceful movements, although now they were slow and uncertain, and the

erect head was bent lower than usual. He stationed himself behind a tree as Hermione passed him.

"God help you, poor child," he murmured, "and give me strength to act rightly." He vaulted over a low wall and got back unperceived to where the chaise stood. The post-boy only saw a tall, dark figure, and thought it was his employer;—he touched his hat civilly;—"its all right, sir."

"You will not be wanted to-night," said Horace, "go home, and take this," and he handed him a sovereign.

The youth looked dubious. "Go home," repeated Horace authoritatively, "or it will be worse for you, —I will see your master to-morrow."

In an instant the horses' heads were turned in the direction of their stable, probably as well pleased as their driver to have escaped the fury of the coming storm.

It was increasing in violence every minute. One vivid flash of lightning lit up the front of the old Grange (which was visible through the leafless trees) with a strange lurid light, and was succeeded by a peal of deafening thunder, through which Horace heard a woman's plaintive cry. He was at Hermione's side ere it had ceased; her head was resting against him, and his strong arm was round her slender waist.

"Walter," she said, "oh, let me go home; it

seems as if it were God's voice speaking to me in anger,—as if it were a judgment upon my sin."

"Hermione, it is your cousin, Horace Durant, come to save you, if possible, from committing a great wrong."

She shrunk from his grasp, and stood before him stunned and bewildered.

"I have sent the chaise away," he said, "and I have come to take you home."

She roused herself, and the proud head was thrown back, and the blue eyes flashed with a strange fire as she said—

"Horace, you have no right,—you are but a stranger."

"I know it," he said, "but even a stranger has a right to prevent the commission of a cruel wrong."

There was another awful flash of lightning,—another peal of thunder, longer, louder, more deafening even than the last, and Hermione, worn-out and frightened, surrendered herself to Horace.

"Take me home; do with me as you like,—only let Walter know."

"Yes, I will come back in five minutes, and explain all to him; but Hermione, promise me that you will not attempt to see him again until you have told Miss Mortimer everything."

And Hermione answered—"I promise."

He almost carried her to the door of the cottage, which in her hurried flight she had left ajar.

"Good-night," said Horace, "forgive me, and be thankful that you have been saved from embittering your whole life."

She turned upon him a face so piteous in its expression of hopeless misery, that he hardly recognized it as her's.

"Thank you," she said, "I suppose it is right; but you will not be hard upon him."

He did not answer, but she read pity in his face, and was satisfied.

One o'clock struck,—two, three, and Horace waited through the fury of the storm at the lodge gates, but no one appeared.

He came to the conclusion that Walter must have watched the whole scene, and thought it best to absent himself, and in his heart he cursed him as a coward.

At eight o'clock the next morning he was at the doctor's door; he could restrain his impatience no longer,—he must see the fellow, and have it out with him.

He caught sight of Ralph in the hall, and called to him, but the boy went off sulkily, whilst a crimson flush burnt on his cheek.

"Is Mr. Grey at home?" he said to the servant who appeared.

The girl looked dismayed.

"Did you say Mr. Grey, sir, or the doctor?"

"I said Mr. Grey,—Mr. Walter."

The servant's eyes were opened to the widest extent of which they were capable, and she stared at Horace wonderingly.

"Mr. Grey, sir, Mr. Walter!—law, haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" asked the young man impatiently, fearing he knew not what.

The corner of the poor girl's apron was applied to her eyes as she answered—

"That the officer came here last night and took Mr. Walter to Seacombe prison."

Horace could ask no questions of the disgrace of Winifred's brother, standing as he was on the threshold of Winifred's home; he walked quickly back to the inn, and there he saw that the evil tidings had spread far and wide; he joined a group of men, of which the landlord was the centre, and he heard that Winifred's brother, Hermione's lover, was what in all his hardest, most bitter thoughts of him, he never could have imagined him to be.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A STRANGER INTRUDES INTO THE SANCTUARY OF HOME.

WE must return to the preceding evening, in the house of Dr. Grey.

Nine o'clock struck, and the boys were putting away their books and going to bed, when a loud double knock at the hall-door resounded through the house.

Julia started, and said she "wished people would be a little more gentle; her nerves could not stand such a racket." The doctor jumped up from his arm-chair near the fire, and looked anxious.

"Tomkins must be worse," he said, "I told them to send for me if any change took place."

Mrs. Grey's sympathies were instantly roused. "His poor wife!" she murmured, in answer to her husband's remark.

The next moment the servant entered the room.

What was it that made Winifred's heart beat faster as she caught the frightened expression on the girl's face? What was it that made all those undefined fears return with redoubled force?"

Walter had turned away, hardly heeding what was passing around him; his thoughts were otherwise occupied; he had staked all his hopes on a woman's love, and he had drawn that woman, with all her trust in him, into what might be utter misery and degradation.

The servant went up to where her young master stood, somewhat mysteriously—

"You are wanted, if you please, sir."

Walter looked annoyed; he had one or two somewhat perverse duns in Redburn, who had lately taken to pester him of an evening.

"Tell the fellow to come to-morrow," he said.

This time the girl lowered her voice. Winifred thought there was something even of pity in the tone, as she said—"You had best come, sir, he won't take no denial. It's no one from Redburn;—it's an inspector of police!"

Walter's face was livid. He looked helplessly at the door and windows, but escape was impossible.

Dr. Grey had left the room, still anxious about his patient; and the strange visitor, a bluff, burly man, had said words to him, which if true, would indeed bring down his grey hairs with sorrow to the

grave. Even in those few seconds, years seemed to have been added to his life. There was a helpless beseeching expression on the face Winifred loved so well, as he whispered to her,—

"Take care of your mother; keep it from her as long as you can."

But the wife was not to be deceived; the eye of affection which for six-and-twenty years had noted all her husband's worries and vexations, could not be blinded now. She turned to him with the anxious look on her face, which was never given to anyone else. He did not meet the glance of inquiry; his eyes were fixed on Walter, and the mother's love saw that it was her son who somehow or other had brought trouble upon them all. She went up and laid her hand gently upon her boy's arm, and asked what it all meant?

Meanwhile the strange man stood on the threshold of the sanctuary of home.

Winifred went up to him, and lifted her eyes to his face,—words would not come.

He looked upon the slight, girlish figure, and into the sweet grave face, and he brushed his great rough hand across his eyes, for he felt that he had to inflict a heavy blow; and accustomed as he was to witness scenes of suffering he was staggered now.

"It may not be as bad as it looks, miss," he said, almost gently, "but they accuse the young gentleman

of having forged his colonel's name to a bill for £200, and I have a warrant here to take him up."

"Then take that—and that—and that—in return for your precious warrant, and learn that no son of Dr. Grey's ever did a dishonorable action yet,"—and Ralph's blows fell upon the broad shoulders.

He must have been a strangely good-natured man, that inspector of police, for even then he was not angry,—he looked upon the honest, ruddy, boyish face with unfeigned compassion; but the brown muscular hands, were pinioned in his strong grasp, and Winifred went up to her impetuous young brother. "Ralph, dearest," she said, "we must wait and hear the truth;—Walter, tell us that it is all a mistake."

But Walter did not answer, and there was a dead silence in the room.

"I will leave you for ten minutes, sir," said the policeman, after he had said a few inaudible words to Walter, "I have your word of honour that the young gentleman does not in any way attempt to escape? I will stand outside the door."

Dr. Grey gave the required promise, and the door was closed.

Walter had sunk down into a chair,—his face buried in his hands, and in front of him stood Ralph and the two younger boys.

"Be a man, Walter," said the brother of fifteen,

to the man of three-and-twenty, "be a man, and give them the lie. Why did you not knock that fellow down; you were strong enough to have felled him to the earth; but tell us now that it is not true, and we will all three go and pitch into him; let my father and mother hear you. Look at the governor," he continued, lowering his voice, "Walter, if you do not tell him that you are innocent, I think he will die."

Walter raised his head;—there they stood, the father and mother who would have given up their all for his sake. They had heard Ralph's exhortation, and they waited the result.

There was hope on the mother's face; her faith in her first-born was still all-powerful; but on the father's features rested an expression of blank despair.

"What does it matter whether I am innocent or guilty," he said sullenly, "of course you ought to judge whether I am capable of doing what I am accused of; but nothing can prevent my going to prison with this fellow,—all my life long there will be a stain upon my name."

Then Dr. Grey laid his hand on his son's shoulder—

"Walter, my boy, those who love you best, will be the first to believe in your innocence. We don't believe you capable of this crime; but have you no word to say, no explanation to offer of how it is

that you and you alone should be convicted of this?"

Still the same dogged, sullen manner, and Walter answered, "The explanation will be given at the proper time and place; my family should hardly need it."

"Walter, my boy, my own, my dearest, will you not satisfy your father,—will you not set all our minds at rest? Trouble has come to us, but we will bear it all, if you will tell us that you would shrink, that you always have shrunk from such a crime as they impute to you now. Walter, bear it bravely; others have suffered unjustly, and have come forth from the fire of affliction purified, and exalted even in the eyes of the world; but it is not for the world we care, it is for ourselves, for our home, for our peace, that we ask you to speak now."

The timid, gentle mother was eloquent in her deep sorrow.

Even then Walter did not answer.

"Boys," said the doctor, "go to bed."

Their father's word had ever been law to them, and unwillingly enough the two prepared to obey.

They had made a bargain lately at Ralph's instigation that the governor should not kiss them as he did the girls,—but on that night Ralph stooped down, and gave his father an embrace warm as one of Winifred's, and the other two followed their leader's example. Then Walter's hand was wrung

convulsively by each of them, for they knew that for many a day he would never again be in the old home.

"I say," said the youngest brother, as they went up stairs, "we can't show to the fellows at school to-morrow, with this stain upon our name."

Poor boys! the lesson of humiliation had come to them early; the suffering for another's fault had thrown a shadow upon their young life.

"Now, Walter," said Dr. Grey, when the door had closed upon his sons, "in three minutes the time will be up. I sent your brothers away, in case you had anything to say you did not wish those poor little fellows to hear. We want no false excuses. Walter Grey, are you innocent, or guilty?"

There was dead silence in the room,—only the murmur of the coming storm was heard without; those within held their breath, and waited for the answer.

It came slowly, indistinctly, almost inaudibly, still with bent head, and averted eyes; and it was the word they wished to hear,—but only the word, the tone and manner were strangely at variance with innocence, and when it had been said,—when they had seen the motion of the lips, and bent forward to catch the sound, not a particle of the weight which had been there before, was removed from their hearts.

No,—the mother's faith was shrouded now ;—the father's unspoken conviction surer.

The word was said which they had longed to hear, and the policeman stood in the door-way.

"I am very sorry, sir," he said, "but my time is up, and the cab is at the door,—we have a ten miles drive to Seacombe before us. Keep up a good heart, sir ; it looks ugly, but God knows the right."

"Yes, God knows it, my boy," said the mother, as she hung upon her son's neck, "ask Him for help, and He will not fail you."

He folded her in his strong arms, and sobbed upon her neck, as he had not done since he was a little boy, and with his father's blessing, and Winifred and Julia's whispered words of endearment, Walter Grey left his home.

"There is nothing to be done to-night," said Dr. Grey, in a voice so hollow and unnatural, that his wife and children hardly recognized it as his ; "to-morrow morning I will go over to Seacombe ;—Douglas, Miss Mortimer's laywer is staying there ; if anyone can help us he will ;—and, my dears, let none of us forget the way in which we can help that poor boy best."

They dared not ask each other their thoughts ; they did not talk of him any more, but all that night there went up fervent prayers to the Great Judge of all, for the first-born in the dreary prison.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### MISS MORTIMER VISITS WALTER GREY'S HOME.

MISS MORTIMER sat at her breakfast table, graver even than was her wont, so pre-occupied that she failed to notice Hermione's haggard face, and slow languid movements, as she entered the room, and took her place, awaiting the awful moment, when breakfast being over, she must make her dreaded confession.

She tried to eat; so did Miss Mortimer, but the effort on both sides was a signal failure, and Hermione looked at the old lady curiously, wondering what she could have heard, to make her so anxious and silent.

"My dear," she said at last, in a faltering voice, "I have heard some people triumph, when their prejudices against another have been verified; I cannot say that I do. This morning, Hermione, I

am sad, because one whom I never liked, but who is the son of my old and valued friends, is in dire disgrace."

Hermione looked up nervously, and her heart beat wildly.

Miss Mortimer continued, "I have heard this morning what with all my knowledge of his selfishness and hardness, I could never have imagined possible; Walter Grey has been convicted of forgery, and was taken to Seacombe prison last night."

There was a long, low cry of exceeding misery, and Hermione had fallen from her chair, and fainted.

A few hours later, in the quiet of her own room, she told Miss Mortimer the tale of her love for Walter; she kept nothing back,—the secret meetings, the great temptation, the weak yielding; and when it was ended, the stern old maid spoke no word of blame, for she felt that her harsh judgment and prejudice had repelled the confidence which might have been hers, and so prevented all this misery.

Even then Hermione would not doubt Walter Grey. She longed to hear more;—to know what Winifred said at the dreadful suspicion which had been cast upon her brother's name; she pitied Walter's misery; she said she knew how his proud spirit would chafe under the disgrace, but no idea of his

guilt ever entered her mind,—she had heard only what everyone else had heard, that he had forged his colonel's name to a bill for £200, and she thought it about as likely that he had done it, as that she herself should have been guilty of such a deed. There were those who had heard of Walter's anxiety for the hasty and secret marriage, (Miss Mortimer and Horace, for instance), who drew their own conclusions therefrom, and were silent.

Hermione was very quiet and gentle in her sorrow, all she begged was that Miss Mortimer should go to the High Street, and hear all the sad details.

So early in the afternoon, the old lady, with a heavy heart, took her way to Dr. Grey's house, and somehow, as she entered it, the conviction of Walter's guilt forced itself upon her more strongly than ever, in spite of all her efforts to chase it away.

The mother and the two girls sat in the darkened room, Julia theatrical and despairing, Winifred trying to master her own most bitter feelings, and to think of, and for everyone; alternately trying to soothe her mother and Julia, and to comfort the boys, who sat in the schoolroom, moody and restless. They had gone to school in the morning, poor fellows, and many a hard, unkind word had been said to them, for although they were decidedly popular amongst the better set, Walter's somewhat affected manners and assumption of superiority, amongst his

former schoolfellows, had made him rather the reverse, and the boys' tempers had been so tried, that the two elder ones had come home with black eyes, and what was worse, wounded hearts; and, at Winifred's request, had remained at home the whole afternoon. They indulged in the delusive hope that Dr. Grey's return from Seacombe might bring some comfort; for that clever Mr. Douglas must surely be able to establish such a palpable fact as Walter's innocence. Winifred had no such sanguine expectations; all faith in her brother had almost unconsciously to herself died away long before, and without the sister virtue, hope did not flourish.

Miss Mortimer's presence on that afternoon, much as they all liked and valued her, was in itself somewhat of a burden, for she was not a person who ever attempted to conceal her dislikes, and her feelings towards Walter were pretty well known by his family; her right as his godmother making her more than usually demonstrative in her antipathy.

There was deep silence, as she took the poor broken-hearted mother's hand in hers.

"He is innocent," said Julia, "he told us he was last night, before they took him to that dreadful place."

"God grant he may be," ejaculated Miss Mortimer, fervently, "Winifred, (and she turned sharply round upon the girl), "do you know why I have special reason to wish him so?"

"No," answered Winifred, truthfully.

"She wished you to know it," continued the old lady, "Hermione I mean; she said that you must be told how she felt for you all; why it is that she has a right to feel for, and with you; because she loved Walter; it has been going on ever since Christmas; now, poor child, she sees how wrong it was to keep it secret. But we will not talk of that,—it was as much my fault as hers—more so, perhaps. Last night at twelve o'clock, she left the shelter of my home, to meet him, and to-day she was to have been his wife."

The bright color was in Winifred's pale cheek; a new light had burst upon her also, in the wish for this hasty, secret marriage.

"Poor child," said Mrs. Grey, "poor child; how she must suffer now; thank God, since the blow was to come, it came when it did;—that Walter had no one but ourselves to share his misery."

It was an unselfish view of the case,—but Mrs. Grey's nature was essentially unselfish; even in the first moments of bitter sorrow, she could feel thankful that another had been saved the wretchedness she was enduring.

"She believes him to be innocent," said Miss Mortimer, "you cannot be more fully convinced that he is guiltless than she is."

It was an unfortunate speech; for not one of

those whom she addressed were impressed with the certainty of Walter's innocence, which she seemed to attribute to them.

"I should like to see Miss Morton," said Mrs. Grey; "will you bring her to us?"

"To-morrow, if she is well enough, she shall come."

And with this promise, Miss Mortimer left the High Street, carrying back to the cottage a heavier heart than that with which she had quitted it an hour before.

Horace Durant was awaiting her return; she told him at once of Hermione's full confession, and thanked him with more warmth of manner than she usually evinced, for the part he had taken in the affair.

He looked anxious and ill,—somehow, Winifred's sorrow affected him strangely.

"I mean to go back to London to-morrow," he said, "I feel that Hermione would rather not meet me just yet, and I should only be in the way here, but if I can be of any use to any one, you know how glad I should be, and do not scruple to send for me at once."

Tears were in the old maid's eyes as she held his hand in hers.

"I had hoped you would have stayed here always," she said, "but all that is at an end now."

He could not resist a smile as he perceived her meaning.

"Yes," he answered, "if we had been suited to each other, it would have been all right; but you see it was not to be; they say a man never marries his ideal. Perhaps Hermione came up too nearly to mine; but, believe me, I never cared for her, but as a brother might have done; I would give her up willingly to anyone worthy of her,—to anyone but Walter Grey."

"But *that* never can be," said Miss Mortimer quickly.

"I don't know," answered Horace, "I believe there is no telling the limits or endurance of some women's love."

Miss Mortimer did not contradict him, for she thought of her own lonely, saddened life, and of the heart which for more than thirty years had been faithful to Hermione's father,—she was the last person to doubt the endurance of a woman's love.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### A GLIMPSE AT WALTER'S REGIMENT.

ABOUT the dreariest of all old English towns, was Seacombe; boasting, it is true, of a beautiful cathedral, and a venerable close, and the remnant of monastic glories, in the shape of the ruins of a magnificent old abbey; presenting certain attractions to tourists and antiquarians, but totally devoid of interest to the regiment of gay young officers, who were stationed at a place called Stephen's Fort, about six miles distant along the coast from Seacombe.

They had been sent there too late in November, —this gallant 160th. What could the Horse-guards have been dreaming of to commit them to such thraldom at such a time? was a question they asked themselves, and each other, at least twenty times during the day; but there was no redress, and they

were obliged to submit to their misery with as good a grace as possible under such melancholy circumstances.

No society was to be found in the neighbourhood; shooting and hunting were unheard of; and even the deans and minor canons who infested this ill-fated Seacombe, seemed to be blessed with peculiarly ugly wives and daughters; there was not even the diversion of a pretty girl to cheer the drooping spirits of these gallant sons of Mars.

They sat at dinner late on the evening of the day which dealt such a blow to the Greys, and instead of the merry laugh and the capital jokes which usually went round the mess-table, there was an anxious look on the faces of all; and when they spoke, it was earnestly,—with strange unwonted gravity in their tones, as if some heavy sorrow hung over them.

And so it did; for there was a brave, chivalrous *esprit de corps* among them, for which the 160th had ever been particularly distinguished, and it seemed as though the disgrace which had fallen upon one of them, belonged equally to all.

To a certain extent Walter Grey had been a popular man amongst them. He was good-looking, rode well, danced well, hunted well, was a first-rate cricketer, and a capital shot; and although for some unexplained reason he had not one particular friend

amongst his brother officers, they all thought him a good fellow, and recognized him as a leader in their sports and amusements.

The news of his downfall had come upon them suddenly, and this had seemed to add to the shock which in any case it must have caused.

The facts of the case were simple enough. A cheque had been presented and cashed at the Seacombe bank for £200; apparently signed by Colonel Verner, but of which he disclaimed all knowledge; and his astonishment was unbounded when the sum was credited to him in his yearly account.

He went to the bank at once to enquire into the mystery. The director knew nothing about it, and appealed to the senior clerk. The latter perfectly remembered the circumstance of having cashed the cheque on the 30th of November; it had been delivered by a man who called himself Colonel Verner's servant; thinking the sum a large one, the clerk had compared the signature with one which the colonel had himself presented a day or two before, and not detecting the slightest difference between them, had immediately given the money.

It had happened rather late in the afternoon, just before the bank closed, and the man had appeared in a hurry, and said his master was anxious to catch the five o'clock train to town,—where Colonel Verner had really gone on that evening.

"He was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, sir," continued the clerk, "I should say somewhere about Mr. Grey's height."

The colonel's confidential servant was in fact a man somewhat of Walter's strong muscular build; but honest and trustworthy as he was, he was perfectly illiterate, and could not even sign his own name. That he should have forged the cheque, therefore was clearly an impossibility, and nothing would persuade the colonel that he had presented it. The man was confronted with the clerk, and cleared from all suspicion.

The height and breadth might be the same, but the clerk said he was not the person who presented the cheque,—of that he was as convinced as of his own existence. So the mystery was unsolved, and the directors of the Seacombe bank set on foot eager enquiries.

For two or three days no clue to the offender could be found; but on that memorable January afternoon, at the same hour in which Walter Grey was urging Hermione's flight with him, the Inspector of the Seacombe police presented himself before Colonel Verner.

There was a shade on the man's brow as he said, "Well, sir, we've found a clue, but it's in a quarter that will make it come uncommon hard to you and the other gentlemen. Mr. Grimsby, the senior clerk

down at the bank, came to me yesterday, and says he, 'Brown, I've remembered something that may help you; it came into my head in the night, when I was lying a bed. One of the notes I gave in change for that cheque was numbered in very faint figures in the left hand corner; old Cropley brought it in just before the scoundrel, whoever he was, came to the bank, and I remember seeing the indistinct figures then, but taking no notice of them.' Of course, sir, I thanked him, and went to old Cropley, who had likewise noticed the number and noted it down,—he's an awful particular old chap; the figures were '8,741'; no one paying the note away in a hurry, and in the evening light, would have noticed them. Well, sir, I traced that £10 note;" (the man spoke hesitatingly, as if he dreaded the effect of his information), "it had been paid to Brooks, the tailor, on the evening of the 30th of November, by—by Mr. Grey."

The colonel started as if struck by a sudden blow, and Brown proceeded;—"but that was not evidence enough, sir; I knew from having myself been employed by one or two of the people here, that young Mr. Grey was very hard-up; some of the tradesmen said they would tell you, or write to his father;—in two days he had paid up money in Seacombe to the amount of £150."

Colonel Verner's face was deadly pale; he would

rather have lost all he had in the world than that this crime should be imputed to one of his officers.

"Grey?" he said, "impossible!" but even as he spoke, the vague mistrust he had somehow always entertained of Walter came to his mind.

"Can we stop the prosecution?" he asked anxiously.

"Impossible, sir; it has gone too far,—the warrant is out,—I have it with me now. I am going to Redburn in an hour's time; and even stopping the prosecution would not do much good, for somehow the story has got wind all over Seacombe; there's nothing for it, but for the young gentleman to stand his trial;—he's sure to get through."

Colonel Verner groaned. He knew Dr. Grey well by reputation, and he felt that that warrant for the son's committal to prison would in all probability be the father's death-warrant.

"Be kind to the poor fellow," he said, "he must be innocent; but anyhow it's horrible disgrace. Let Dr. Grey understand that I do not prosecute; let me know when you return."

It was midnight when Brown returned to Seacombe, and after some necessary delay at the prison, he drove on to Fort Stephen, and sought Colonel Verner in the mess-room.

The officers were all there still; there were no cards or billiards played that night, and when the inspector

of police stood in the door-way there was a lull of anxious expectation.

"Is he innocent?" asked a fair light-haired boy, (the junior ensign,) rousing himself from a horrible dream of his mother being hung for forgery.

The man smiled grimly. "That was no business of mine, sir," he said, "I warned him not to say anything to me."

"And his poor father and mother—" asked the colonel, "how was it with them?"

In plain, rough, unvarnished words, Brown told them of how the cruel blow had come upon those who loved Walter Grey,—even of the chastisement he had himself received from Ralph.

There were tears in Harry Neville's (the junior ensign's) eyes, which he did not attempt to hide, and amongst his seniors there was dead silence, and strange agitation; for most of them had fathers and mothers, and brothers and sisters at home, and that tale of household agony, found its way to their hearts.

"Treherne," said Colonel Verner to the captain of Walter Grey's company, "you are the proper person to go first to the prison to-morrow morning; tell Grey I shall call during the day; but I think he had better see one of you first, and let him know, my good fellow, the grief that this—this—this strange mistake is to us all."

Treherne was noted as the jolliest and best hearted. fellow in the whole regiment; no one ever could quite make out whether he was in jest or earnest; and how he ever got out of his numberless escapades was a marvel to his brother officers. But now his merry blue eyes wore an expression no one had ever seen there before, as he answered—

"Yes, sir, I'll tell him all; he knows us well enough to understand how we must all feel this awful disgrace."

The colonel looked up quickly, and read that the young captain's faith in his subaltern was not unshaken; but he felt that it would be unfair to press him with questions, and so forbore to ask any.

The truth was, that some months before, Treherne, in settling some debt of honor had had occasion to doubt Walter Grey: and his was one of those honest, truthful natures which when once shaken find it difficult to recover their trust in a person.

Harry Neville knelt by the side of his bed that night, and asked God to have mercy on the prisoner and those who mourned for his disgrace; and perhaps there were others in the old fortress, who thought of those they loved at home, whose prayers went up through the fury of the storm, for one, who although he was accused of bringing disgrace upon

the corps hitherto "*sans peur et sans reproche*," was in such heavy sorrow.

God be thanked that amongst honest true-hearted Englishmen, it is ever so. They may be impatient of another's faults; tenacious of their own rights; harsh-judging sometimes, when the world smiles upon those who walk through life with them; but when real trouble comes,—when through sin of his own, or mistake, or misconstruction, the iron enters into the soul of their comrade, and in the sight of the world he is a disgraced man, then, I say, Englishmen rally around him, speak only of his virtues, strive to be blind to his faults, and the knees, which alas, may not often be bent in supplication for themselves, are bowed low in intercession for their fallen brother.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### WALTER IN PRISON.

THE morning light shone upon Seacombe, but did not tend to enliven it.

All looked dim, and grey, and dreary. The old cathedral, with its time-worn walls, and all its architectural grandeur stood out clearly in the pale wintry light, on a steep hill, just above the town, seeming to keep watch over the mass of buildings stretched at its feet; then at some distance from the most thickly populated part of the city, situated in fact, almost directly upon the shore, with the heaving waves ever advancing and receding against its strong impenetrable walls, was the prison, with its iron-barred windows, and ponderous gratings, and huge, nail-clad doors.

It was just nine o'clock; a cab from the railway station stopped at the principal entrance, and Dr.

Grey, bowed low with the heavy burden of his grief, alighted, and sought the governor's house.

That official met him with an air of deepest respect, for he knew the good doctor's character for rectitude and benevolence, and he pitied him in his heart, for the cruel blow which had fallen upon him in his old age. He had lost his only son a few short months before, and he had almost felt inclined to murmur and repine when the stern decree went forth, but now he gave thanks for the pure, unstained life of the youth, who had been taken from the evil to come.

"May I see him?" was the poor father's first question.

"Whenever you like, sir; at any time, you or any of your family, will always find admittance."

A few quiet tears rolled down the old man's face as he followed the governor through many a long passage, and up innumerable flights of steps. A little bird sang a glad sweet song. Dr. Grey looked up at it sorrowfully, as its cage hung suspended from a hook in the vaulted roof; perhaps he envied it its unconciousness, singing so merrily in that dismal home, or perhaps the joyous notes jarred against the poor, almost broken heart.

He stood there seeming powerless to go further. "It is in here, sir," said the governor, opening an white door; and there, sitting on a wooden chair,

with the untasted prison fare before him, sat Walter Grey.

"My boy!" said Dr. Grey, "my own boy!" and his arms were round Walter's neck, and he kissed the bearded cheek, as he had done when this cause of so much misery had been a little innocent boy.

He did not see that his son already had a visitor, until Walter introduced Captain Treherne, and the young man stepped forward and grasped the father's hand.

There were no words spoken; what could any one of them say to re-assure the other? Any man of the 160th would have been a better comforter than Treherne, with all his doubts of Walter. As it was, he could only look compassionately at the honest benevolent face which spoke of such unutterable agony, and at the expiration of about two minutes he got up to take his leave.

"Keep up a brave heart, old fellow," he said to Walter, with an effort none but himself knew how great; "it's a dreary time for you;—but thank heavens, we shall have the assizes in about six weeks, and then," (and Treherne gulped down the words,) "you will be all right."

Walter still looked sullen and morose.

"They say I may have some of my things here,—will you send my desk and a few books?"

"Yes, anything you want. Some of the fellows are sure to come and see you."

"Thank you," said Walter shortly, "but I had rather not see one of them. I don't wish to be taunted with my misfortune."

"Grey," said Treherne, reproachfully, "you should know us better; there was not one of us last night down to little Neville, who did not feel as if we had a brother in—in—I mean here."

Dr. Grey took Treherne's hand in his. "Forgive him," he said, "think of the bitter disgrace, and and don't wonder that he appears ungrateful."

Treherne did not answer for an instant, then he said—"where are you staying? I am sure our colonel would like to see you."

"I shall be at the 'Golden Star' this morning, but I must return to Redburn at two o'clock. I can't leave them longer," he said, "they are all so miserable at home."

There was a deep sob from Walter as his father spoke of the wretchedness he had caused; somehow Captain Treherne liked him better from that time.

The father and son were left alone. At the end of an hour, Dr. Grey had quitted the prison, not having been able to obtain a word more from Walter than he had spoken the preceding evening. He had no objection to Mr. Douglas as his counsel, he said; but the whole thing was a plot against him, and he felt convinced he should not get through the trial.

Soft words of entreaty had no effect upon him commands only seemed to harden him; and the father did not see a ray of hope through all the darkness.

Not then; even less, two hours afterwards, when with a brow on which sat anxious thought and perplexity, Randolph Douglas, after a long visit paid to Walter, entered the room in the "Golden Star," where Colonel Verner and Dr. Grey sat.

The commanding officer's kindness had been such that the doctor felt that whatever might be the result of this sad business, he could never forget it, and when with instinctive delicacy he took his leave, it was with the poor old man's words of heartfelt blessing.

The door was closed, and the doctor's eyes were raised to the lawyer's face enquiringly.

Randolph moved, so that the light should not fall upon him so clearly,—he could not stand that anxious, scrutinizing gaze.

"I have seen him," he said, "but he is somewhat close and reserved; this suspicion has hardened him. You must give me time to consider the case. If we could prove an *alibi* we should be all right; but there seems to be no chance of that,—the greatest is to find how your son came into possession of so much money at that time,—and this he does not seem anxious to tell; I believe from what I have

heard that he played high, (Dr. Grey hid his face in his hands,) I think we may find that he won very nearly that amount."

And this was all the hope,—this chance which would save Walter from utter ruin, and at the same time prove him false to his given word,—unmindful of all his promises,—a perjurer, if not a forger.

Randolph promised to be at Seacombe again in a week, and then with doubts and fears on his mind as to the cause he had promised to advocate, he returned to London.

Dr. Grey went back to the prison weary and disappointed. It wanted only half an hour to the time of his departure, and he trusted that in those last minutes he might be able to accomplish what he so earnestly wished,—to have some cheering word to take back to those mourners at home.

But he met with the same dogged, sullen, impenetrable silence; only the father's eye of affection noted an expression of despair on the handsome face, which had not been there in the morning, and he read that the lawyer's visit had not brought the prisoner hope.

"Mr. Douglas says if you would but account for the possession of that money, Walter, my boy, it would be all right. He does not think the numbered note of much consequence except taken with the rest of the evidence which would go against you—

having so much in your purse at that particular time.

"The money was my own; I need account to no one for what belongs to me," was the churlish reply.

Again the old man spoke; "Walter, perhaps when last summer, I helped you out of your gambling difficulties, and made you swear that you would never again touch cards or billiards, I exacted too much of you,—the fault may have been mine; God knows I have suffered for my want of judgment."

For the first time, Walter answered without reserve or constraint.

"Father, do not blame yourself, you who have never been but the best of parents to us all. It was my own miserable weakness caused me to sin; I was not able to withstand the temptation when it came in my way; I got into debt again, and Winifred and Miss Mortimer helped me out of it; that was last August, when you were ill and worried, and I sought to spare you, by not telling you of my difficulties. I joined the regiment again, and again I broke my promises made then to Winifred; I played high, and it seemed as if the scales had turned in my favour, for since that time I have always won,—I have not known what it was to lose."

A sickly ray of hope was on Dr. Grey's face; he grasped Walter's hand convulsively—

"And so with these gains, ill-gotten though they were, you paid your debts? Walter, in pity tell me if it was so."

Walter bowed his head, but no word came from his lips, and the sullen look was on his face again, which his father had seen there from his son's earliest boyhood, and he knew that it would be as impossible to wring any confession from him then, as it had been to extort from him the acknowledgment of his childish faults.

The deep-toned prison clock struck two.

"I must go home now, Walter, and may God soften your heart, my poor misguided boy. Have you no message for them,—for your mother, or for Winifred?"

He could not hear those names and continue so apparently indifferent.

"Give them all my love, kiss mother for me; tell them all, down to little Harry, how I hate myself for causing them all this trouble. Father, never let either of the boys be as selfish as I have been;"—then he hesitated, and searched in his desk for a letter he had been writing on that morning. "Will you see that this is safely delivered?" he said.

Dr. Grey started as his eye fell upon the address.

"Miss Morton!" he exclaimed, — "Hermione! What does this mean?"

"We were engaged," answered Walter; "she was

to have eloped with me last night, and this was to have been our wedding-day;" and he laughed a bitter laugh as he looked at the four walls of the prison.

It was another blow to the father's heart,—another proof of his son's entire want of principle; but he said nothing, and put the missive into his pocket.

"I will give it to Miss Mortimer," he said, "she may do with it as she likes; once more, Walter, may God forgive and bless you;" and through all the long, dreary drive to Redburn, there was one sound ever ringing in Dr. Grey's ear,—the harsh, grating noise which had resounded through the long passage, as his son was locked up in his cell, left to all his loneliness and the reflections, which, even were he innocent of this last crime, his father knew must be very bitter.

He dreaded confronting the anxious faces which he knew would meet him on his return home. Cold and wretched as it was, he almost wished that the drive could have been prolonged, and the evil moment postponed.

The boys were on the watch, ready to give notice of his approach, and as the fly rattled through the street they opened the door and stood on the steps to help him out.

"Don't teaze him, dears," Winifred had said gently, and they understood her, and checked the

longing to ask him what Walter said, and what Mr. Douglas said.

In the back ground, standing under the lamp,—its soft light falling upon their pale, anxious faces, were the mother and the two girls.

They dared not look at him; there was an undefined, anxious dread, that was preferable to the horrible certainty they feared to hear. Winifred opened the door of the dining-room, and with his hat still on his head, and his coat drawn up so high that nothing of his face could be seen, he went up to the old arm-chair, where he always sat,—where Walter and all the others had played upon his knee.

It was little Harry who took his father's hat off at last and carried it away, and then even Ralph and Tom,—thoughtless and heedless though they were, read that in the old man's face, which forbade them to ask any questions.

"Walter sends you all his love," he said at last, in a low, faltering voice, "and there was a special kiss for you, mamma."

The mother smiled for the first time all through that day, and then Ralph took courage, and said—"Of course Mr. Douglas can prove him innocent."

"He hopes to do so, my boy,—God grant he may!" And so at last that first long day of wretchedness came to an end in the doctor's house. It was the forerunner of many such to come,—of weeks made

up of alternate hopes and fears; of feverish longings for the end; of sickening dread of what that end might be. Early the next morning Hermione went to the house of sorrow; she felt proud of her right to go to them; she amongst them all maintained her firm trust in Walter's innocence; the shy, timid feelings which under any other circumstances might have been hers, were swallowed up in the overwhelming anxiety they all shared in common. It seemed to bring peace to them all, to hear her repeat her conviction that he was innocent; she was the one amongst them who did not shrink from mentioning his name. She took her place in that one day of sorrow as the daughter of the house, more naturally than she would have done in months of quiet and happiness.

Walter's letter had been given her by Miss Mortimer as soon as the latter had received it from Dr. Grey's hands. It was full of extravagant expressions of penitence for all he had made her suffer, and lamentations over his hard fate; and to her he said the same as he had done to his family,—that she ought to be the best judge of whether he could be capable of the crime imputed to him. How she judged him we have already seen,—how tenderly, and leniently, and far above his deserts.

"Dr. Grey," she said, "I don't understand anything of business, but if my paltry money can be of any use, promise to appeal to me."

He thanked her in his courteous way, but in his heart there was even a harder feeling against Walter, as he looked into the lovely, innocent face, which told of a sorrow too great for words.

A letter lay on the table, addressed to Walter Grey, in Hermione's clear, bold hand-writing.

Miss Mortimer was puzzled what to do.

"My dear," she said, trying hard to be gentle on the subject, "of course it is very natural that you should wish to answer the letter you received,—I have nothing to say against it,—but I hope that you have made it clear, that you cannot keep up any further communication."

There was something of pitiful disdain in the glance which Hermione bestowed upon the poor old lady.

"Miss Mortimer," she said, struggling to be calm, "I know you always hated him, and I am very sorry for it, but I thought you understood how—how dear he was to me."

"*Was*, my dear; yes, of course; but now, think of the dreadful crime."

Then there was an expression on the girl's face which Miss Mortimer had only seen faintly shadowed there once before, when Hermione had asserted her freedom of action; now, she read such mingled love and pride, and determination there, that she quailed beneath the fixed determined gaze as the girl answered—

"He *was* dear, he *is* dearer than ever in his sorrow; talk of his crime if you will,—blazon it about Redburn that he is a forger, a deceiver, anything you like, but in so doing, remember that you are speaking of my affianced husband."

So Horace Durant had spoken truly when he judged what the depth and endurance of Hermione's love would be,—and Walter, as he read the letter which told him of the faith which would last until death, and the love which even then would brighten his life, cursed his folly for not having secured his prize two short days before—

"Then all would have been well," he muttered.

All well! Walter, where was your conscience? Dead, I am afraid, long ago,—swallowed up in utter selfishness and sin.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A GLEAM OF SUNSHINE FOR WINIFRED.

THE gentle mother was stretched upon a bed of sickness,—sickness which they thought was unto death. The tension on her nerves had been too great for human endurance, and she had given way at last.

For a week she lay unconscious of all that passed around her, only for ever calling upon her first-born son, who could not come to her. They watched her lovingly, anxiously,—sometimes even Walter was forgotten for an instant, in that agony of suspense.

At last there was a gleam of hope, where for days there had been nought but despair,—a calm, deep sleep succeeded to the delirium of fever, and Mrs. Grey awoke to consciousness.

It was late on that day that the doctor and Julia returned from a walk, which he had compelled the

girl to take, for she had been as anxious and self-forgetful as any of them—all the foolish, girlish affectation had disappeared, when real trouble and motive for exertion came.

The father went up to the sick-room, where Winifred kept her silent watch. "My child," he said, "indeed you must go out now, or we shall have you laid up; Miss Mortimer and Hermione will be so anxious to hear how she is this afternoon, —will you go and tell them that she is better even than I could have expected or hoped."

With languid footsteps Winifred obeyed. She had not crossed the threshold of her home since this disgrace had fallen upon it, and now as she walked along the quiet streets in the waning winter's light, trying to shun all observation, she could hardly realize that it was not all a horrible dream wrought by her own overstrained imagination.

She went back in thought to all the long months during which that unspoken presentiment of something dreadful that was going to happen,—those undefined, untold fears for Walter,—had taken such hold upon her; then came the wakening to the terrible truth, the realization of all those gloomy forebodings. She saw but one end to it all,—ruin and degradation for Walter, misery and humiliation for them all.

She heard the shrill whistle announcing the

approach of the afternoon train, but she walked on unthinkingly.

The outer life of Redburn, the comings and goings, all the trivial doings which she had been wont to heed, were nought to her now; for herself and all belonging to her she felt that there were but two interests in the world,—the one in the sick-room at home, the other in Seacombe prison.

What was it then that made the hot blood rush to her cheek, as turning up the lane that led to the cottage, she discerned a gentleman, followed by a small boy, coming towards her from the railway station, and heard a voice, which sometimes came to her in her dreams, say—

"Tim, take my portmanteau to the 'Swan,' and tell Mrs. James that I am coming."

In another moment, Horace Durant had taken her unresisting hand in his, and held it fast whilst he enquired for her mother.

"Better—much better, thank you; if we can but keep up her strength, it will be all well."

Then there was a strange silence as they walked side by side.

"Winifred," said Horace at last, "I may as well tell you at once why I came here to-day. I heard that Mrs. Grey was ill—that fresh trouble had come upon you; I knew I had no right to share it, but I could not be so far from you. I did not think I

should see you so soon; but now I must speak. Will you let me be with you always,—shield you as best I can from all that may annoy and vex you through life? Since the first evening I ever saw you I have loved you,—Winifred, will you be my wife?"

The words sent a strange thrill of happiness to her heart, but she did not answer.

"I know," he continued, how little you have seen of me,—how unworthy I am of you, but I would try to make you happy: all I have—all my life would be devoted to that one aim. If I have been presumptuous, if I have spoken too soon, forgive me, and only give me a shadow of hope for the future."

She turned those grey eyes of hers upon him for an instant, but he did not see in the fading light, all that was written there; and her words were a death-blow to his hopes.

"Thank you, Mr. Durant, for the honor you have done me; believe that I am grateful for it,—how grateful I cannot tell you; but you must forget me as soon as possible, for what you ask can never be, —I cannot be your wife."

"Cannot! why? I do not wish to intrude upon your confidence, but only tell me if there is anyone else you love, and I will wish you good-bye now, and never see you again."

He bent forward to hear the answer.

"No, there is no one I shall ever marry, I would not bring disgrace upon any one."

He saw it all now, and hope returned.

"Winifred," he said, "do you love me?"

She tried to turn away her head,—she dared not trust herself then,—she could not bring herself to say what was not true; but he made her look into his face, and he read there what he wanted to know."

Still she was resolute in her refusal.

"Mr. Durant, do not urge it,—it can never be."

But he was not to be daunted.

"Winifred," he said, "your brother's fault is not yours; the world would not blame you for his misdoings, harsh-judging as it generally is; and as yet he is innocent,—every man is until he is proved to be guilty."

A strange, sickly smile crossed Winifred's face.

"There is crushing evidence against him," she said, "I have not a hope of his acquittal."

Neither had Horace; but he did his best to comfort and re-assure her, and Winifred listened to him eagerly,—and somehow, the world looked brighter than it had done one short half-hour before.

She was but a weak, gentle girl, and he was a strong, resolute man; after all, it was but natural that he should win the day; how it all came about,

we need not enquire, but Winifred entered Miss Mortimer's drawing-room with a new hope in her heart; and Horace wanted to come in, but was entreated to wait at the gate until she re-appeared.

Miss Mortimer and Hermione seemed oppressed with a weight of care,—there was one perpetual source of annoyance between them now; Walter's name was a sealed subject, but the memory of that last conversation had not been obliterated, and a strange reserve had sprung up between them.

Hermione followed Winifred to the door.

"Winifred," she said, "I cannot bear this much longer,—I must see him; now that your mother is better, you must manage it."

Winifred promised to see what could be done; and when she joined Horace at the gate, she told him of Hermione's wish.

"Papa will not leave Redburn for an hour until mamma is better," she said, "but if we could go to Seacombe, I should be so thankful; Walter always held papa in a certain amount of awe,—perhaps he might say more to us than he did to him."

Horace drew her more closely to his side,—"I have a right to go with you, my dearest," he said, "into any scenes of joy or of trouble,—I must be always with you now; to-morrow Douglas is to see your brother,—he came from town with me, and has gone on to Seacombe; on Thursday, if your

mother is well enough, I can go over with you and Hermione."

At the door stood Dr. Grey, awaiting his daughter's return, and somewhat anxious at her prolonged absence. Something in her manner told its own tale, and he turned to Horace Durant, with a warm, cordial greeting.

His consent to the engagement was asked, and most readily given; only he urged the same objection as Winifred had done,—in trembling tones the old man spoke of the disgrace which had fallen upon their name; he even wished to make it a condition that all should depend upon the result of the coming trial, but to this Horace would not agree, so the matter was settled, and to the house of mourning, Horace's bright presence brought a gleam of sunshine.

Mrs. Grey continued steadily to improve during the next week, and on the day Horace had named, he, Winifred, and Hermione set out for Seacombe.

None but Horace, with his wonderful tact, would have made Hermione feel so at her ease, after their last meeting, but even with this it was a mournful journey, with a dismal end in view.

Randolph Douglas met them as they traversed the dreary streets, on their way to the prison. He started as he saw the trio,—Hermione's presence there, told him what he had dreaded to hear, and his greeting was nervous and anxious.

He turned back with them, and escorted them to the door of the jail, and there the two girls were placed in the charge of the governor, who promised to take them to the prisoner.

Horace would not accompany them. "You may tell him about our engagement, Winifred," he said, "if you like, and let him know that there is nothing on this earth I would not do for your brother's sake; but I have never spoken half-a-dozen words to him; I would not intrude upon him now without some expressed wish of his."

Winifred and Hermione traversed the dreary passages, and the same chill came to their heart, which had fallen on that of Dr. Grey. Winifred tried to bear up; Horace's last words to her had been those of love and encouragement; but poor Hermione stood so entirely alone, no wonder if her courage forsook her as she went to see her lover *there*; even his sister could not feel as she felt then. Walter was unprepared for their visit, and as the door opened to admit them, he was sitting moodily at the deal table, a shade of deeper care and anxiety on his brow than when we saw him last, for he had heard of his mother's illness, and conscience told him he was the cause of it. The accounts that morning had been better, but oh, how he longed to fly there, to hear her speak to him, and call him her own boy once again. It was so dreadful to be so

near, and yet so distant,—within a short two hours' drive, still unable to go to her, to see her perhaps for the last time.

That trouble in his home had roused all the better feelings in Walter's nature.

He did not raise his head as the door opened; he thought it was the turnkey bringing in his dinner,—and Winifred's hand was laid on his shoulder, and a long, silent kiss imprinted on his brow, almost before he was aware of her presence.

Then he started up, and an ashy pallor suffused his cheek as he said—"In pity tell me the worst at once,—is she dead?"

"No, she is better, much better, dearest Walter; she did not know we were coming here, to-day; papa was afraid it would agitate her; but he says now that she will soon be well."

There was an ejaculation of fervent thanksgiving, and Winifred again placed her hand on her brother's arm. "Walter, I did not come alone,—Hermione is with me."

She stood there in a dark corner, watching the scene; frightened and trembling now that she stood in Walter's presence.

He went forward a step or two to meet her, and the lovely face with all its expression of unutterable love was lifted to his; it seemed as if some messenger from another world had come to bring him comfort

in his intense wretchedness. He could find no words for utterance, and *she* was the first to speak.

"Walter," said the clear, silvery tones of the sweet voice,—and at that gentle bidding he approached and stooped down and kissed the fair brow.

Through all the after years of their life, the memory of that visit to Seacombe prison never faded from the memory of either of the girls; the low, wailing noise of the sea dashing against the old walls; the flickering shadow of the sun trying to lighten up the dismal white-washed cell; many a time did it come back to them with almost startling reality, when other scenes had become dim, and indistinct, viewed in the long vista of the past.

Walter was his *best* self on that day; there was something touching in his humiliation, in his certainty of his fate, and his apparent submission to what appeared inevitable; he did not seek to extenuate himself,—to say whether or not he was innocent or guilty; he seemed to throw himself upon their mercy, and to claim their forbearance. Hermione's faith in him was more than ever established, and Winifred's hope grew brighter as she saw that the sullen, reserved manner had disappeared.

There was a cloud on his brow when they talked of his brother officers; although they had shown him all possible kindness, he would not see one of them, and Colonel Verner's one visit had not left a favour-

able impression on the commanding officer's mind.

The moment came at last when the girls felt they must leave him. Winifred found an opportunity of whispering her secret, and he wished her joy mechanically, but sent no message in return for Horace's kind words of sympathy.

"We shall see you again, Walter," said his sister, "before very long."

"Hardly," he said, "some meddlesome idiots have been interfering, and, with the exception of Douglas and my father once or twice, I am not to be allowed to see anyone until—"

Hermione looked up quickly. "Oh, Walter, it is not very long; we must try and bear it; after the assizes all must be right;—then,"—and her voice sank into a whisper meant only for his ear,—"then, Walter, we will never part again."

He held her in his strong arms for one moment, and then the turnkey appeared, and they went through the long passages again, and emerged into the air and light, which poor Walter might not breathe.

Horace waited for them at the gate; there was a deeper shade on his face than when he had parted with them an hour before.

He had been walking with Randolph Douglas; they had not exchanged many words on the subject of Walter's disgrace; but what had been said had

left an unpleasant impression on Horace's mind.

"You don't think there is any fear of his not getting through all rightly, do you, Douglas?" he had asked.

And the other had answered—"I have seen many a case which looked far better, turn out badly."

Horace dared not ask any further questions, for he saw that Randolph did not choose to answer them.

"Will it make any difference to you, Durant," the lawyer said, "if this unfortunate affair goes contrary to our wishes?"

And Horace's hearty answer did one good to hear—

"I would marry her if she had twenty brothers, and if they were everyone of them forgers."

## CHAPTER XXV.

### GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY.

THE long wished-for, much-dreaded day dawned at last upon those who felt that the clearing of a great doubt, or the certainty of a still greater evil would come to them ere its close.

Those intermediate weeks of suspense had been strangely uneventful, marked only by Mrs. Grey's gradual recovery, and by Horace's frequent arrivals at Redburn when he was least expected.

His presence brought the only gladness which ever came now to the house in the High Street, for as the time drew nearer, Hermione's courage failed her, and each day her cheek grew paler; it was Winifred's turn to be comforter now.

Only Dr. Grey had seen Walter during all those weeks of wretchedness. He brought home no very satisfactory account of him; he was quiet and humble now, but very low and dejected.

The Horse Guards had kindly taken into consideration the low ebb of amusement to which the gallant 160th were reduced, and that distinguished corps had been removed from Seacombe.

All Walter's friends felt that this was a relief; they had dreaded the presence of his former associates in the court, during the trial, and they had heard of their departure from the scene of his disgrace with considerable satisfaction.

Randolph Douglas would not give an opinion as to the probable result of the trial; in all his experience he had never before felt so uncertain of the turn things might take.

There was an old uninhabited house in Seacombe, which a friend had placed at the disposal of Dr. Grey, and thither they had all gone; the father and mother, and brothers and sisters, on the night before the trial.

They could not be ten miles away at such a time, —they must hear the verdict, whatever it might be, sooner even than the telegraphic wire could convey it to them.

Randolph Douglas went to the prison in the early morning, and left it with the puzzled, worried look upon his brow, which after a visit to Walter was sure to be seen there.

He hurried down the street, and at the door of the house where the Greys had taken up their tem-

porary sojourn, he met the good doctor accompanied by Miss Mortimer, Horace, and Hermione.

It had been so managed before, that Randolph was to find seats for them, where they might hear and see all, and still be unobserved.

No persuasions had been able to restrain Hermione from her determination of being present, and Miss Mortimer had no choice but to accompany her.

The boys had been clamorous to be allowed to attend, but their father would not hear of it, and they were obliged to submit to his decision, although even their accustomed obedience could not prevent their making plans amongst themselves, to slip away by-and-bye when all was quiet."

"Have you seen him?" was the father's first question of the lawyer.

"Yes,—he is quite calm and collected; he asked whether you were to be in court, and I avoided answering,—I thought the knowledge of your presence there would only unnerve him.

The old man's eyes, full of entreaty, were raised to Randolph's face,—there was untold eloquence in the glance, the eloquence of a father pleading for his first-born son.

"I need not ask you to do your best for him," he said.

"I will, so help me God," answered Mr. Douglas, heartily.

Then there was another petitioner at Randolph's side—

"Mr. Douglas, in pity get him off,—they say that you can do all you try."

The face that Randolph turned upon Hermione was pale as her own, and the voice in which he answered was low and tremulous—

"They who say so over-rate my talents, Miss Morton; I always try to do my duty—I have never had such a motive to tempt me to go beyond *that* before,—to-day I have to please *you*."

She could not mistake that earnest, passionate gaze, but she turned away, and muttered her thanks, for she felt that to suffer such a look as that to be fixed on her, was wronging Walter.

They walked on in silence through the little dirty back streets, avoiding the more public thoroughfares which led to the court-house. Even then they did not entirely escape observation,—one or two compassionate glances were directed towards Dr. Grey, upon the sorrowful face of the old man who all through his life had never wronged any living mortal, and who was now suffering such bitter agony for the sake of another.

Randolph led them to their seats in a high, out-of-the-way gallery, and left them without a word, without daring even to look at Hermione.

The forgery case was *the* case of the assize week.

There was nothing else of the smallest interest to be brought forward, and nearly the whole population of Seacombe and Redburn strove to press into the court long before the hour appointed for the time.

One or two poaching cases were disposed of, and then Walter Grey appeared in the dock, and every eye was fixed upon him.

He bore the ordeal calmly,—looked round to see if he could discover one familiar face amongst that moving mass of heads; then Walter Mortimer Grey, (Miss Mortimer could not resist an exclamation of impatience as the second name was read,) was accused of having forged Leonard Verner's name to a bill for £200, and asked whether he pleaded guilty or not guilty?

The answer came, the usual one in all cases, "Not guilty," and the voice in which it was spoken was firm and distinct, as if the dreadful emergency had sent courage to Walter's heart.

He declined to challenge any of the jury, and then crossed his arms upon his breast, and cast his eyes to the ground.

His handsome face, and noble manly bearing created an immense sensation in his favor. A murmur of admiration ran through the court, but was instantly checked.

Then the counsel for the prosecution opened the case; stating the facts which on behalf of the

directors of the Seacombe Bank it was his duty to bring forward.

He spoke fairly and honestly, alluding to the prisoner's high social standing, and gentlemanly manners, together with his father's worth, upon the blameless life led by Dr. Grey, and upon the example set before his children; but he pointed out how alike amongst our kings and our peasants the father's worth was no criterion of the son's; how the life of the one might have been held up as a bright, shining light to many generations, whilst the deeds of the other might be, and had been committed to posterity branded with the stain of infamy.

He pointed out the evidence against Walter,—the numbered note, the possession of money at that particular time, which could not be accounted for; the temptation to sin caused by his numerous debts, and the repeated threats of the tradespeople to apply either to his father or the colonel of his regiment; and then he asked the gentlemen of the jury to bear in mind that they had to discharge a duty to their country which no feelings of compassion for the prisoner, or pity for his much-honored family must prevent them from executing faithfully and impartially.

Then the first witness was called, James Grimsby, clerk at the Seacombe Bank, who deposed to the fact of having received the cheque purporting to be

signed by Colonel Verner, from a man who pretended to be his (the colonel's) servant, and who wore a large military cloak, and a hat with a cockade in it; he detailed all the circumstances of the case, and the counsel for the prisoner enquired whether he could swear that the prisoner at the bar was the same man who appeared at the bank?

No, the witness could not swear to it; he thought there was a difference in the color of the hair, but the height and breadth he was sure were the same, and he had noticed that the man had particularly white regular teeth.

The fact of the note given in exchange having been numbered, was corroborated by old Cropley, the man who had taken it to the bank; and Brooks, the tailor, further testified to having received it from Mr. Grey. Other tradesmen were called up who proved to having dunned Mr. Grey for money for their various bills without success, and had at last been obliged to threaten him with stronger measures in the event of his not paying them; but that on the 1st and 2nd of December, he had discharged the greater part of his debts to them.

There was a good deal of cross-examination, which did not elicit anything, and when Colonel Verner was placed in the witness-box he only swore that the signature to that cheque was not his, and then gave a short honest statement of his observa-

tion of the prisoner's previous character, and his thoroughly upright, gentlemanly bearing since he had joined the regiment.

Whatever the good colonel's private feelings might be, he would not withhold from Walter what he thought was truth, and felt to be his due.

One or two witnesses came forward with whom the prisoner had been in the habit of playing cards and billiards, but the luck of which he had boasted to his father, and upon which Randolph Douglas hoped to have founded his defence, did not seem altogether to have amounted to one quarter of the sum which had to be accounted for.

Randolph stood up to open the defence, never having felt more hopeless about any cause committed to him; still his cheek flushed and his eye sparkled with excitement; for he had looked up ere he had begun speaking, to that distant gallery, and he had seen Hermione's eyes fixed upon him entreatingly,—he felt he was pleading for her, more even than for Walter; and eloquent as Randolph Douglas had always been considered, on that day he surpassed himself.

They listened to his impassioned words,—to the subtle arguments he adduced,—to the impossibility of a man with such a character, and in such a position, committing such a crime.

Then he spoke of the future;—of the stain which

would never be blotted out if they suffered themselves to be blinded by the merely circumstantial evidence which had been brought forward; of the life-long misery which would blight the fair promise of youth, embitter the repose of age, and consign to a living tomb the hopes and aspirations which were the portion of every man.

He would not speak, he said, of those who had already suffered such agony on the prisoner's account, his learned brother had already done justice to the character of his client's father, and words of his would fall far short of what was due to Dr. Grey. Most of the gentlemen of the jury were themselves fathers; he would, therefore, leave the prisoner in their hands, convinced that they would do their duty honestly, justly, and mercifully, as Christians, and as Englishmen.

There was hardly a dry eye in the court when Mr. Douglas sat down, and the younger and more hopeful spirits amongst the audience felt that there could be but one end to such an appeal; Walter must be acquitted.

Then the Judge summed up, and somehow hope died in the hearts that had felt so sure of the result.

He spoke kindly, justly, reviewing all that had passed, stating the facts for and against, which had been brought before them; giving no opinion of the merits of the case, but somehow leaving an impres-

sion upon those who heard him, that all Randolph Douglas' fervour and eloquence had failed to establish one single proof of the prisoner's innocence.

The jury retired, and there was a low whispering murmur through the court, as comments were made upon the probable issue of the trial. In the gallery, where those most concerned sat, not a word was spoken; their eyes were fixed upon Walter, who had been allowed to have a seat in the dock, and whose proud head was buried in his hands.

It seemed to those who felt that their fate was then to be decided for aye and ever in this world, that the jury must have been absent an hour, though in reality it was not more than a quarter of that time; they resumed their seats at last, with slow, deliberate footsteps, and grave solemn faces.

Then Walter lifted up his head, and the clerk of the court put the question, "How find you? guilty, or not guilty?"

There was sadness on the foreman's brow as he rose to answer, for he thought of the misery the words would bring to many.

"We find the prisoner Guilty, but in consideration of his youth and previous high character, we earnestly recommend that he may be dealt with leniently."

What was it that caused all within the court to look up quickly to the distant gallery? Surely it was from thence that that cry proceeded,—a woman's voice in agony that would not be restrained.

Walter's cheek blanched, as that sound fell upon his ear, more than it had done when he heard the verdict.

Then again all eyes were fixed upon the prisoner as he was asked if he had aught to say why judgment should not be passed upon him.

But his head was bent down, and there was unutterable agony written on his face as he answered, "No, there is nothing."

Then again the Judge spoke, and the people listened in breathless suspense, as he said how painful it was to him to have that to say which must rend so many hearts with sorrow; the gentlemen of the jury had done their duty, and had recommended that the prisoner should be mercifully dealt with; in consideration, therefore, of all the circumstances of the case, he would commute the sentence of fifteen years' penal servitude to ten years' transportation into whichsoever of her Majesty's colonies her Majesty's Government would be pleased to appoint."

Walter bowed when the Judge sat down, and turned to thank Randolph Douglas for his able defence, and to ask if he could see his father.

Randolph, gloomy and dispirited at the result of

the trial, promised to do all he could; and as the court was cleared, he made his way to the gallery, and there he found Hermione and Miss Mortimer bending over Dr. Grey, upon whose face it seemed as if the mark of death were stamped, and he was told that Horace had run with all speed to fetch a doctor.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### GOOD-BYE.

HE lived; God only knows how the father bore the heart-rending agony; but when the doctor arrived with Horace, followed closely by Winifred, Julia, and Ralph, he opened his eyes, and something of a smile was on his face, as he saw the anxious glances that were fixed upon him.

He asked no questions, and they dared not enquire how much of that dreadful scene was in his memory, or how much in those first moments of bodily weakness was in mercy hidden from him.

The prison van conveyed Walter back to his solitude and gloom, with the weight of the dreadful certainty of his disgrace in the eyes of the world upon his heart, added to the pangs which conscience and remorse had begun somewhat tardily to assert.

He had spoken hopelessly of the result of the

trial, but he had never really believed that somehow or other he should not get off. Now there was not a chance of reprieve.

Ten years viewed from the buoyancy and hopefulness of three-and-twenty! A life time would have seemed nearly as interminable; in his heart Walter almost wished that he had been sentenced to death: it seemed as if anything would have been easier to bear than those ten years spent amongst companions taken from the very scum and dregs of the earth. Far away too from all he loved, from all who would have taught him what was right, and brought him back again into the paths from which he had strayed.

The world looked dark indeed; there was no gleam of light in this life, no hope when the other should begin. Such thoughts were in Walter Grey's mind, as the vehicle clattered over the streets to the jail; perhaps one drop of agony might have been added to the cup which was already well nigh filled to overflowing, had he known who were the occupants of a cab which wended its way slowly along in the direction of Redburn,—had he seen his father's white head pillowed on his mother's breast, her tears falling on the face so unutterably sad, in the dreamy unconscious state into which Dr. Grey had again relapsed.

Winifred and Julia sat opposite them, the former

feeling that she could hardly wish him ever to awake, to realize what it was that had come upon them all.

The doctor had advised their taking him to Redburn at once; he thought that there was very little doubt but that his patient would recover from the dreadful shock his system had sustained; but that the quiet of his own home was more likely to be beneficial to him than the miserable reminiscences of all connected with Seacombe; so the sad party returned by slow stages to Redburn, leaving Miss Mortimer and Hermione with Horace and the boys to follow the next day.

In the dead of night, when no curious or sympathizing eyes could gaze upon him, Dr. Grey was carried up the steps of his home to his own room—where the picture of the young ensign in his bright new uniform hung above the mantle-piece,—of him who had been the joy and pride of the father's heart,—now a convicted forger in prison.

Winifred shuddered as it caught her eye, and she contrasted the merry, laughing features of the boy, with the grave, care-worn face of the man she had seen a few short hours before, standing in the dock, a condemned criminal.

"Walter, my Walter," she murmured, "I would willingly have died to save you."

But there was much to be done, and thought of,

leaving Winifred but little time for the indulgence of her heart-rending sorrow.

There was one grief too, which was specially hers; the worst had come, and she could not now be Horace's wife; he might urge it, but it must never be; she must not, would not, bring him down to the level of her disgrace; of Horace Durant, it must never be said that he married the sister of a forger.

But the next day, Horace arrived and proved to her the utter fallacy of her reasoning, and almost brought a smile to her sad face by saying that he was so bent upon marrying one of Dr. Grey's daughters, that if she would not have him, he would propose to Julia, and asserting his right to comfort her in a way that could not be resisted.

He had tried to see Walter, but all admission to the prisoner's cell had been refused; Hermione had written him a letter, which the governor had promised should be duly delivered.

"I do not pretend to know its contents, Winifred," said Horace, "but I know Hermione's character, and I can make a shrewd guess at them. It was dreadful to see her before she wrote that letter, but I sat in the window, and could not resist watching her as her pen flew along the paper, and it seemed as if the cloud that was on her mind disappeared with each word, and when at last it was

duly sealed and delivered, she was the most quietly cheerful of us all."

"Then you think she will be true to him still? Oh, Horace, impossible, the heiress of Hovenden, and a—a—convict."

"She is fully convinced of his entire innocence; somehow, I think the intensity of her love has come with all this sorrow. She thinks him ill-used, and unjustly condemned, and all the heroism, and truth, and self-sacrifice of her nature are enlisted in his behalf. Winifred, mark my words, that missive told Walter that she would willingly wait ten years to be his wife."

Horace was right. In the depth of his despair, in the bitterness of his great humiliation, Hermione's letter reached Walter Grey, and told him that if the whole world believed him guilty, she should still know that he was innocent, and looking hopefully to the completion of that term of years, which seemed to him so endless; then she would still be his wife, true to him through it all.

His first impulse was to confess to her his utter worthlessness, and to absolve her from the promise contained in her written words; then he thought he would wait—wait till the wide ocean rolled between them, when no voice he loved could upbraid him for his guilt.

Horace had judged rightly also when he said that

Hermione's love had increased with all the shame and disgrace that had been heaped upon her lover.

Had she been engaged to him long, I think ere a few months had elapsed, his utter selfishness would have made itself apparent, and she would never have married him; but the scorn and opprobrium cast upon his name, and her unshaken conviction of his innocence threw around him a halo of romance, with which years' of quiet ordinary circumstances would never have invested him.

A day or two elapsed, and Dr. Grey rose from his bed a shattered, broken-hearted old man. He longed to leave Redburn,—to take his family away, and try his fortunes elsewhere; but at his age it was hard to begin life in a new place, so he went back to the routine of his daily duties with a weight of incurable sorrow at his heart, whilst the hair which had been iron grey, had turned white as snow.

A month elapsed; the lengthening spring days dawned upon the earth, the flowers reared their heads above the ground after the dreariness of winter; all nature spoke of returning gladness, but failed to bring peace or joy to those connected with our tale. The time for Walter's departure was fixed, and special permission was granted that he should see his friends, and wish them all good-bye.

Captain Treherne and one or two amongst his brother officers went to see him, and he was so

thankful for their kind thought of him, and bore his trial so humbly and yet so manfully, that even Treherne went away feeling more assured of his innocence than he had ever done before.

There were still harder partings to come,—separations more difficult to endure, than if those who bore him such love had stood at his bed-side, and prayed God to take him to heaven.

They prayed for him now, that he might be watched over and kept from harm during those years' of sorrow and of labour, and brought back at last to his home when the term of servitude should be over.

There was no thought of his sin then (if indeed he were guilty) in the minds of his father and mother, whilst to his sisters and his young brothers, only the memory of the happy hours of their childhood's home, came in that parting, passionate embrace.

Miss Mortimer was gentle to him then; she was too generous to be hard upon him, as she looked at the face so changed in those few months, the prison dress, and closely cropped hair making him scarcely recognizable.

"God bless you, Walter," she said, "you are young yet; if you are innocent, you will live it down; if guilty, God grant you repentance."

Hermione had the last words in the prisoner's

Mrs. Grey had been carried out in Ralph's strong arms, and Winifred and Julia had led their father away.

"Walter, my dearest, I have never asked it before, —I ask but for one word now to cheer me through all the long years that are to come;—was that signature yours or Colonel Verner's?"

He looked into the lovely face, radiant with love for him, and he could not in that moment seal his doom; he bent his head and said distinctly—

"That signature was Colonel Verner's."

She was satisfied. Their lips met; there was one long, lingering kiss, and Hermione went away counting those ten years but as a few days for the love she bore him.

Months afterwards, they heard that the convict ship had reached Norfolk Island in safety. By that time Winifred was Horace Durant's wife, living in a small house in a London street, where Tim gloried in a green suit with brass buttons; where Horace wrote diligently so that he might be able to give Winifred's young brothers a start in life; whilst Winifred herself, saddened by the one trial of her youth, was somewhat grave and thoughtful, but never failed to wear a smile upon her brow when Horace was near; and Randolph Douglas, who was more eccentric, and I am afraid I must say, more misanthropical than ever, was always greeted with

so warm a welcome, that he felt however silent and irritable were his moods, he was never an intruder in Horace and Winifred's home.

And when the news of the safety of the convict ship came to England, Hermione was ruling at Hovenden Grange, where Miss Mortimer had likewise taken up her abode.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A MESSENGER FROM OVER THE SEAS.

MORE than two years had elapsed, ere our story re-opens. The old house in the High Street was shut up now; and a young doctor drove about Redburn and its vicinity in a flashy kind of vehicle, and somewhat dismayed his patients by the grandeur of his studs and rings,—it came out in the course of time that his father was a rich jeweller,—but this is nothing to the purpose.

Dr. Grey was dead; he had survived his son's departure about eighteen months; one day he came home more tired than usual and slept,—the deep, calm sleep which sin or sorrow would never more disturb,—the calm repose which knows no waking save in the paradise of God.

The widow and Julia lived in Miss Mortimer's cottage; the good old lady had asked as a favour

that they should take care of her home and all her possessions for her, whilst she lived as cicerone at Hovenden Grange, for she said that if ever Hermione married, she should return to the cottage, and be very glad of companionship.

The boys were all away; Horace and Hermione had taken care of them; Ralph was studying for a civil engineer,—he had set his affections upon the army, poor fellow, but at his own wish it had been given up after Walter's disgrace. Tom was working steadily in a merchant's office, and Harry was still at school, where his extreme solicitude for any of his companions' ailments, and his desire to bind up cut fingers, and try experiments upon black eyes, had procured for him the title of "the doctor," and his mother hoped that her youngest boy would follow his father's profession.

In the house in Wilton Street, Tim spent all his leisure time, and expended all his boyish devotion in amusing a fair-haired boy, who was Hermione's godson, and whose name was Hector Durant.

And Hermione, sought for, admired, flattered by all, ruled at Hovenden Grange.

The girlish loveliness had ripened into the beauty of early womanhood; she seemed one born to be obeyed, formed to exercise her gentle sway over those around her. She must have been gifted with more than an ordinary share of common sense, not

to have been spoilt by all the adulation she received; it was freely given by all,—rich and poor alike owned her power,—she seemed to take all hearts by storm, to claim all this homage as her right.

And had she nought to give in return for all the love that was so richly lavished upon her?—nought but those sweet smiles and kind courteous words? Was the heart that beat beneath all this loveliness so cold and impenetrable that even the highest and noblest had sought for some favour to be shown, some encouragement to the suit they meditated, and found none?

The story of her misplaced love was known to none. Horace and Winifred had only guessed at her promise of constancy to Walter; but nothing that had ever dropped from her lips had given it confirmation, and when Miss Mortimer sometimes alluded to the chances of her marrying, something of the old defiant glance was in Hermione's eyes, which always sent a thrill of fear to the spinster's heart.

The summer sun shone on the old Grange; there it lay shrouded amongst the trees, the gabled roof glimmering in the bright light, the stone walls sparkling like jewels beneath the dazzling rays.

Walking leisurely up and down the colonnade, her hand resting on the head of a noble Newfoundland dog, which stalked majestically at her side,

seeming to have installed himself her protector, was the heiress of all that wealth and beauty can bestow.

Her eyes were fixed upon the stately avenue of old elms; perhaps that gaze brought back some sad reproachful memories, for she sighed wearily, and stooped and hid her face against the dog's black head.

"Two years!" she murmured, "only two years! eight more without him;" then she raised her head, and gazed lovingly around her, on every feature of the landscape, which was so familiar to her. "He will not like to live here," she mused, "we must go abroad, to Italy, the land of my birth, and Horace and Winifred shall live here, shall they not, Hero?" But Hero was no longer docile and obedient,—he detected a stranger crossing the lawn, a man in a dress not usually seen in Redburn; Hermione's heart beat fast, and her cheek was paler than usual; she wondered who it could be, and what he could want with her,—for that his visit was to her, she felt sure.

"Down, Hero, down!" she said, and at last the dog obeyed, and the stranger approached to where she stood.

He was an old man, clad in the garb of a priest of the Romish Church; a dusty, worn-out traveller, with a bronzed face and a weather-beaten look about him, but with a kindly glance in the dark eyes, and

an expression of compassion upon the sharp features as they were turned upon Hermione.

"Miss Morton, I believe," he said.

Hermione bowed, and the priest continued—

"I have just returned from a long journey; I bring you tidings of one you loved."

Hermione held to the pillar of the colonnade for support—

"You come from Norfolk Island," she said, "and you bring me bad news of Walter Grey; tell me, is it not so? Is he dead?"

The priest took the girl's hand in his—

"My daughter, he was repentant at last; he died in the faith of the Holy Church."

Hermione looked cold and rigid, and the priest continued—

"He charged me to deliver this packet into your hands, to tell you that his last prayer was for you, —he said it was best for you that he should be taken,—that you would be happier without him."

"Never," answered Hermione, with the calmness of despair upon her lovely face, "never; God knows I would have been true to him through all the long years;" and then the pent-up agony could be endured no longer, and the girl sank down, crushed by the weight of grief.

The priest raised her from the ground, and supported her through the open window into the drawing-room, where Miss Mortimer sat.

The old lady rose from her seat in an agony, as the strange apparition appeared. She was a good Protestant, and had a virtuous horror of anything approaching to Romanism,—she had heard of priests who had laid violent hold on rich ladies for the good of the Church, and in that moment she believed that Hermione was going to be taken away by force, and incarcerated in a convent for the rest of her life.

The priest saw her discomfiture, and hastened to re-assure her, and to tell her the object of his visit; and by this time, Hermione had recovered from the first shock, and asked to hear more of Walter. What there was to tell, the priest told in simple words; how he had from the first noticed the superior appearance of the young convict, and tried to find out the cause of the settled gloom upon his brow,—how he had succeeded at last in gaining his confidence; and one day, he was called to visit Walter, lying on the bed from which he never again rose. He spoke of the convict's deep, earnest repentance for the sorrow he had caused at home; of his faith in the Holy Church to which he had succeeded in converting him; of the dying moments fraught with hope and peace.

Miss Mortimer, with all her prejudice, could not but feel grateful to the man who had made Walter turn his thoughts to other than the things of earth,

however much she might condemn the errors of the faith he taught.

He rose to go at last, and once more approached Hermione—

"My daughter, God bless and comfort you; read what has been written in the quiet of your own room, for it will cause you greater sorrow even than the news I have brought you to-day."

Then he went to the cottage to tell his sad tale there,—to receive the mother's blessing for his care of her son, and to hear her oft-repeated assurance of Walter's innocence. It was no duty of his to draw the veil from her eyes; what had been told him under the seal of the confessional was sacred; and Hermione might do as she pleased with the paper entrusted to her.

The heiress spent the rest of the day in her own room,—all were refused admittance, even her maid when she went to her late at night, was sent away.

The priest had spoken truly when he said that there was greater sorrow in store for her even than the knowledge of Walter's death. She read over the letter which had been written at his dictation, until it seemed as if it burnt in words of fire upon her heart; then, when all was silent in Hovenden Grange, she put it into the grate, and watched it crumbling into ashes before her eyes,—she who had most faithfully believed in his innocence, should alone see the record of his guilt.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE TRUTH AT LAST.

"HERMIONE," the letter had said, "this will be given you by one who has promised to deliver it into your hands; and when you read it, he who has caused you so much sorrow, will be lying in his distant grave.

"You will think kindly of me then, dearest of all, as you have thought all along, when I so little deserved it; I would go down to the grave, if I dared, with your trust in me unshaken; but now I must make the only reparation in my power, for the misery I have brought upon your young bright life.

"You must not mourn me as you would one who was innocent and injured; for, Hermione, the words must be written,—I am guilty of all of which I am accused; although on that day when you came to see me in my dreary prison, and asked me whether

Colonel Verner or I had signed that cheque, I answered you truly,—that signature *was* Colonel Verner's; but this fact does not make me less of a criminal than I am. Have patience with me whilst I tell you my story; it shall be as short as possible.

"When I first joined my regiment, I got into low company, and acquired a taste for gambling; at first I played for very little, then after a time I joined my brother officers, most of whom were men of fortune, and then I played high, and lost. I got into difficulties, and appealed to my father; he helped me nobly, kindly, as he always did everything; but he extorted a promise from me that I would never again touch cards or dice. I broke my resolution, perjured my word, and again I was as badly off as before. One morning I went into the colonel's room; I found him sitting at his table, writing, with his cheque-book before him. He was called away suddenly, and quite unintentionally my eye fell upon the book. For some unaccountable reason, he had signed his name to the draft, but the date and the sum to be drawn were not filled up. The temptation was too great. I knew the colonel was the most absent and forgetful of men, and I tore the paper from the book, and put it into my pocket. I took it to my rooms, but I was not yet utterly lost, there were some right feelings left in me still,—I applied for leave, obtained it, and went

home, to tell my troubles to Winifred, and get her to intercede for me with my father. He was ill and worried then, and my gentle sister appealed to Miss Mortimer, and got me out of my troubles. I was desperate then, and frightened her; I changed her bright sunny nature, into one of fear and timidity. I noticed afterwards that Winifred was never the same again; all through my life she had idolized me, and the disappointment in me crushed her; when the final blow came, I think it came least unexpectedly to her.

"I went back again to my companions, and again I wavered in my resolutions, again I broke my promises. I did not lose then; I won small sums, and I don't know what evil spirit was in me,—I became reckless and extravagant, lived beyond my means, and was threatened by the tradesmen of Seacombe with ruin and disgrace. I had almost forgotten the cheque, but one evening I was driven to the verge of despair, and, in a moment of madness, I filled it up. You know the rest;—the horrible trickery, the mean subterfuge, the dreadful disgrace. Yes, Hermione, when I saw you that Christmas, when I dared to tell you I loved you, I was a forger. I need not hide anything now; the memory of my crime was for ever haunting me; there seemed but one hope,—to find the means of repaying it in some way. I urged you to that hasty marriage, thinking then it

would be in my power to make it all right; but that night I was taken to prison, and you were saved from becoming the wife of a criminal.

"You have heard the tale of my villiany, but Hermione, dearest, you must believe in my love,—believe that had you been penniless, you would have been equally dear to me. I have told you all the truth; do me the justice to believe this; also to believe that I should never have allowed you to link your fate with mine,—although I had not the moral courage to confess to you my guilt before.

"And now, Hermione, I am dying; the good priest who will give you this, tells me that there is hope even for me; greater hope now that I have told you all. Make whatever use you like of this, but think of me with pity, for even on earth I have been punished for my sin. Hermione, something tells me that you will be happy still; I could write more,—I could tell of one who loves you truly; but time fails; all looks dark now, and things seem fading from my sight—all but your image, Hermione, which will be with me to the end. Oh, Hermione, it may be in God's infinite mercy that we shall meet again, beyond the darkness of the grave."

Hermione's faith and trust were shaken, but her love remained true to the dead; she roused herself

from her sorrow, to comfort Mrs. Grey, and Julia, and Winifred, who came to see them; but a change came over her life from the day the priest visited Hovenden Grange.

For a time she entered into no society; then she proposed to Miss Mortimer that they should travel for a year or two. The old lady agreed to do anything her darling liked, anything that would bring back the bloom to her cheeks. So Hovenden Grange was shut up, and Hermione visited the land of her birth; her last act before she left England was to write a note to the priest, enclosing a cheque for £1000, to be devoted to the use of the mission, to raise funds for the support of which, had been the object of his journey to England.

Miss Mortimer was told of what she had done, and ventured to remonstrate; but the priest had carried peace to Walter's death-bed, and Hermione felt that if another poor wandering soul found the comfort he had done, her alms would not have been misplaced, though bestowed out of the Communion of her own Church.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### HOME AGAIN.

TWO more years had elapsed, and once more we take a glimpse into Horace's house in Wilton Street.

Tim grown out of all knowledge, a bright intelligent black-eyed lad of sixteen, was rushing about the house in a frantic state of excitement. Little Hector dressed in his best white frock, and broad blue sash, strutted up and down the room with an air of importance, whilst his father and mother, and his little six months old sister, sat at the window apparently awaiting an arrival.

It had been Hermione's especial request that no one should meet them at the station after their prolonged absence on the continent.

The hour of their appearance, too, was quite uncertain; there was just a chance that they might

not arrive at all on that day, and Winifred sighed hopelessly as she contemplated Hector in his beautiful frock, (Hermione's present,) inserting a monstrous cherry between his little ruddy lips, and smilingly watching the bright juice trickling down the blue sash.

Baby was consigned to her papa's care, and Winifred rose to administer a gentle rebuke to her first-born, and to try and remedy the mischief, but in the midst of the operation Horace shouted out, "here they are," and rushed down to the door with his little girl in his arms, much to Tim's discomfiture, who thought such a proceeding an unwarrantable interference with his duties, and undignified in the extreme on the part of his master.

He was rather surly in consequence to Hermione's servant, who seemed to look down upon the boy with supreme contempt, and muttered something between his teeth about "buttons and stupidity." In the mean time the party down stairs were very happy in each other's society; Miss Mortimer—supremely contented at having once more set foot upon English ground—was amusing Horace with a tirade upon foreigners in general, and the odiousness of the men in particular, whilst he listened with the old merry smile upon his face, which looked almost as young as it had done five years ago, when we first made his acquaintance.

Winifred and Hermione bent their heads over the children and talked; sometimes of Italy, and of the village where Hector Morton had married his fair young bride, and where Hermione had been born; and where in her foreign tour she had spent three or four months, talking sometimes of the delights of all she had seen in her travels, but always going back to the perfections of the little ones, and forming plans for a long visit, which Horace was to be enticed into paying Hovenden Grange before many weeks had passed.

The day flew by only too quickly, and the next morning Miss Mortimer and Hermione bade their friends good-bye,—cheered with the promise which Horace had made, that as soon as they were settled at home he should take Winifred and the chicks to Redburn.

The pretty village wore its holiday dress on that summer afternoon, as Miss Morton's carriage drove through it. The church-bells sent out a glad welcome, and the school children cheered lustily as they saw the kind face they loved so well, smiling upon them as sweetly as ever.

Home again, after all the months of wandering in search of the peace which her bitter disappointment in Walter had robbed her of so cruelly. It had come back at last; Hermione was content now, looking forward to a life uncheered by the bright

ness of the perfect human affection of which she had dreamt, but fraught with duties and responsibilities, which if rightly fulfilled, would bring rest when the battle of life should be over.

The old Grange looked very lovely as Hermione stood at the window of her own room, and gazed upon her possessions. There were strange thoughts in her mind on that evening—memories of Walter, of his last letter, of the secret known only to her and to the good old priest.

Then that strange allusion to one who loved her, —what could it mean? For answer there came the remembrance of the passionate gaze Randolph Douglas had fixed upon her on the morning of the trial. She had not heard of him all through those long years, except in some chance way through Horace or Winifred, and she wondered what his life was now,—whether it was lonely still, uncheered by human affection, or brightened by some gentle presence in his home.

The first weeks of her return to England were very busy ones; there were visits to be received and paid, and things to settle which had been left, until she could give an opinion on them; then came the re-action after all the excitement, the sense of loneliness, the conviction that all the years of her life must be spent with no one on whom to expend the love which was so strong within her, with no one

from whom she could seek the sympathy, which was the great want of her nature.

She felt she must go into society again now; be flattered, courted, admired, as she had always been, and still live that desolate inner life, into which no one might penetrate. And often when such thoughts as these were in her mind, there came unbidden before her the image of Randolph Douglas.

Horace and Winifred and the children came in due time; as it happened, just during the assize week.

Miss Morton had asked a few friends to dinner to meet Horace and his wife; and on the morning of the party, the former ran in quickly after his ride—

"Hermione, I hope I have not done wrong, but I have taken a great liberty; Douglas is in Redburn, —came over from Seacombe this morning—and I have asked him to dinner; he had sundry scruples at first, but I managed to overcome them.

The blood rushed to Hermione's fair cheek, as she answered, "Any friend of yours will be most welcome,"—and then hurried from the room on the plea of giving some orders to the servants.

The dinner hour arrived; the guests assembled, and were received by Hermione with her usual dignity and grace. Randolph stood before her, their eyes met, and with a hurried bow, and a few low words of greeting he passed on. She noticed during

the evening that he was graver and sterner-looking than ever; he did not approach her, was hardly as attentive as the most ordinary civility demanded, and with a heart more weary and desolate than usual, Hermione retired to her room that night.

The next morning, a note was handed her,—a few lines from Randolph Douglas, requesting half-an-hour's private conversation. It was granted; and honestly and manfully, with hardly a hope of success, but feeling that he would rather hear his dismissal from her own lips, than endure the agony of doubt any longer, Randolph pleaded his cause. And in that moment it seemed as if a veil were lifted from Hermione's eyes; the love which Walter, in his dying moments, had said was hers, shone before her now, bright and clear. To the man who had proved her right to a name, and who had pleaded so eloquently for her lover, she gave the priceless treasure of her true, noble heart; not as she had given it to Walter, with all the passion and fervour of girlish enthusiasm, but with the enduring, intense devotion of a woman's trust and love.

An hour later, with a strange look of happiness in her face, and a soft light in the blue eyes, Hermione stood before Miss Mortimer and Winifred, and in the doorway, with his dark brows bent upon them, and a smile on the grave face which was not often seen there, was Randolph Douglas.

Winifred saw what had happened at a glance, and instantly showed her delight by kissing Hermione in true feminine fashion. Some perception of the truth dawned upon Miss Mortimer, for she walked up to where Randolph stood, and drew him into the room. "You are not worse than most men, Randolph Douglas," she said, "rather better, perhaps; take her, and make her happy."

Randolph strictly obeyed the old lady's injunction. Hermione was happier as the grave lawyer's wife, even than in her wildest moments she had ever imagined she could be; she gave him all love, and honor, and respect,—there was not a thought of her heart which was not his. But one secret of her past life was never divulged, even to her husband, —Randolph never heard the confirmation of Walter Grey's guilt from his wife's lips.

Miss Mortimer lives at the cottage with Mrs. Grey and Julia,—no persuasions would induce her to take up her abode at the Grange; she is as fond of Hermione as ever, but there is another now, who bids fair to rival his mother in the spinster's affections,—she was faithless to her principles, and again stood god-mother to a boy,—and the most perfect being on earth in her sight, notwithstanding his sex and somewhat mischievous propensities, is little Mortimer, Douglas Randolph's and Hermione's eldest son.

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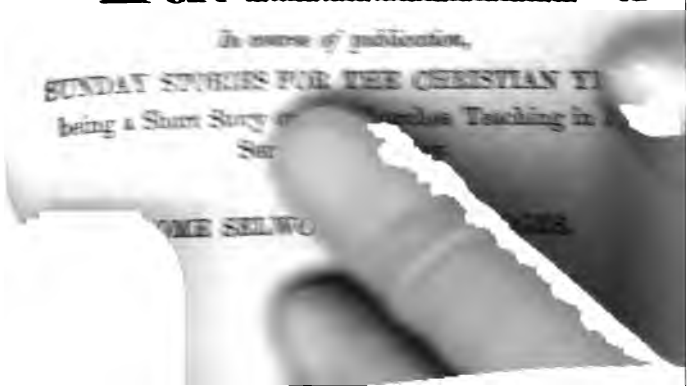
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